

LOVE AND GOD

BY
HASHIM NADIM

DEDICATED TO
Every love and everyone who loved.

Confession:

I am at a loss to understand as to why people describe love as a personal story. Love is not the story of one or a few individuals, it is a universal story because, there is hardly anyone in the world who has not passed through this experience. The only difference lies in the truth of acceptance and hypocrisy of denial. Through the words scattered in the pages of this book, I have endeavoured to interpret the way in which love and religion influenced me. The battle of love and religion was fought by my heart and bitterly experienced by my soul but I leave it to you to decide whether it was won by love or religion. I have never aimed at establishing the superiority of love or religion. There were only a few questions which needed to be answered realistically. In this clash of love and religion, some new questions appeared to be cropping up in my mind and I, therefore, request that this book should be read only by those who have the courage to confront new questions in life. Answer is however, not compulsory.

Hashim Nadim.

CHAPTER 1

THE FIRST RAIN

It was perhaps, the rumbling of the wheels of the aeroplane on the runway that awakened me from my half-asleep condition. The aeroplane had landed at London's Heathrow Airport and was now slowly moving on the runway towards the parking area. According to the announcement of the air hostess, it was six O' clock in the morning in London.

The city of London was engulfed in the darkness resembling the twilight. It appeared as if it had been raining throughout the previous night and the small drops of the light spray of rain could be seen quivering on the wind screen of my seat. Rains are indeed a strange phenomenon of nature. Sometimes, heavy rains continue to fall throughout the life, but still, the inside of man remains dry as ever, while at other times, only a few drops are quite sufficient to make us thoroughly wet although those who are around us, remain utterly unaware of our condition. This first rain of London was also of a similar nature. It made me wet from outside but my inside aridity was still piercing into my throat like sharp thorns.

The aeroplane had now been joined to its scheduled tube on the parking stand and one after the other, the yawning passengers were descending on the terminal by means of the tube. By the time I reached the lounge, the dim whiteness of the morning had become slightly visible on the horizon. But on account of the dark thick clouds and continuous drizzling, pale yellowish darkness, similar to that of a sad evening, could still be seen outside the glass wall of the lounge.

I am Hammad Amjad, the offspring of an illustrious traders' family of Pakistan. My ancestors have always held highly important government posts before and after the creation of Pakistan. Since long, trade has been the favourite occupation of my family and top ranking government officials of the country have always regarded it as an honour to be invited by us to evening tea. The same Hammad Amjad stood alone and dejected in the Arrival Lounge of London's Heathrow Airport on that cold and wet morning. Apparently, I had come to London with the intention of getting a two-year degree from the Economics Department of Kingston University but I knew very well that it was only a pretext and a means of seeking escape from myself. I had made up my mind to get involved in the hustle and bustle of London to such an extent that I might not be able to find even a single moment to spend in my own company. I had a strange state of mind at that time. I was ready to cope with the unpleasant existence of others but was quite unwilling to face myself even for a single moment. By all means and standards, man is a helpless creature. He may shatter into bits all the mirrors that he finds in the outside world around him, but he will have to face his inside mirror all the time whether he likes it or not.

By the time I went out of the terminal after getting clearance from the Customs officials and passing through other routine procedures, a few star-like flakes of snow have got mixed up in the cold air blowing outside. As I took the first step into the open atmosphere, a severe cold wave had a shivering and chilling impact on my whole body and quite spontaneously my hands rushed towards my overcoat collars and I properly covered my whole body. However severe and intense the cold may be, its first wave always creates a sense of freshness in you. This gust of cold wind also awakened all of my inner sensations. I began looking around in search of Kamran who had been my bosom friend since childhood but as I was already expecting, as far as I could see, I could find no sign of him anywhere.

At first, I thought of taking a taxi and going to his flat myself. I had already visited London several times and it was by no means an unknown or new city for me. But later on, thinking something else, I picked up my single suitcase from the airport terminal and began dragging it towards a distant piece of land having some dried grass on it. There was a row of beautiful wooden benches placed at some distance from one another. I decided to sit there and wait for Kamran.

The mixture of snow flakes in the air had increased steadily and by the time I reached my selected bench, snowfall had started. I can still remember those childhood days when in the evening, Kamran and I used to see the typical white milky snow clouds in the sky and spent the whole night lying in

our beds, praying for the snow to fall. The next morning, we used to be overwhelmed with joy on seeing the star-like snow flakes falling on the ground and the whole city covered with the white blanket of snow. We would immediately rush outside and become busy throwing snowballs at strangers and passersby in a secretive manner, while the members of our family were searching for us everywhere. I wonder why those blissful winter months of childhood fly away in the twinkling of an eye while the scorching heat of youth continues to overshadow us for centuries without the slightest respite.

The piece of land where I was sitting was somewhat elevated from the ground and I could, therefore, quite easily catch the glimpses of tall old buildings of London in the distance. Within a short time, the whole city was completely covered with snow and some distant on-looker might have considered me as well to be a statue made of snow. There was no news of Kamran as yet, but he had been the same type of careless chap right from his childhood. In our childhood, both of us had been extremely reluctant to get up early in the morning and as I still remember, even during annual examinations, we hardly managed to reach the examination hall after the distribution of question papers. Childhood was spent in the same delightful and take-it-easy manner but then, all of a sudden, the family circumstances of Kamran took a tragic turn when his parents passed away in a traffic accident. Kamran was left alone in the house because her only elder sister had already got married and gone to her in-laws. After his father's death, it was revealed to Kamran that he had inherited a huge burden of unpaid debts from his father. As the demands of the creditors increased, Kamran was left with no option but to sell his native home and remaining property and shift to London. He opened a small restaurant in London with the little bit of money he had after the payment of all the debts. With the passage of time, life became easier for him and he fully adapted himself to the life of London. In fact, he had always been very fond of London and same was the case with me. Perhaps, both of us had a conservative spirit and conservatism and melancholy are the typical characteristics of London. Every city has its own peculiar temperament and characteristics. I had never like to live in howling, screaming and noisy cities, which are hot, humid and suffocating and where one is always haunted by the fear of losing something. I have always been impressed by people and cities having calm and cool temperament. Cities like London are capable of absorbing the pains and sorrows of people eager to lead a calm and quiet life.

As I looked around, I saw a smiling young couple passing from in front of me. The girl had a closer look at me. Her cheeks were becoming fiery red due to cold and her eyes had a constant smile. As she saw me, she smiled and after wishing me good morning, they went to a bench placed at some distance, sat there and became busy in their amorous exchanges. It was quite evident from their dress that they had come out in this biting cold for the sake of jogging. I smiled while thinking about the severity of weather and the romantic activities of such young romantic lovers. Weather has different impacts on different people. I can still recall those snowy winters which I spent in my native city of Quetta. I used to observe that when snow fell throughout the night, the poor labourers and workers would come out early next morning along with the members of their families and got busy in removing snow from in front of their doors and from their rooftops with the help of shovels and large wooden boards. The reason was that if this snow was allowed to stay on the roofs of their unpaved houses for a long time, it could create damaging holes in the roofs. All through the winter, they kept on praying to the Almighty God to protect them from such severe snowfall. But here in London, the scene was quite the opposite. Undaunted by the heavy snowfall, these two young lovers had come out of their homes in the hope of enjoying the weather. Weather is the same but its impacts are not the same for all the people. Suddenly, the chain of my thoughts was abruptly disrupted when I found someone violently shaking my shoulders and saying, "Wake up sir, Narowal Junction has come."

In astonishment, as I looked up, I saw Kamran's face because the rest of his body was completely wrapped in warm clothes. With all his evils, he was smiling and looking towards me. Both of us were locked in a warm embrace.

“Excuse me my dear Medi, I’m a bit late. But what are you doing here, sitting in this snow? I’ve ransacked the whole terminal in search of you while you are sitting here?”

It was my first meeting with Kamran after two years. Two years ago, he had come to the same Heathrow Airport to bid farewell to me. Till that time, life was full of beauty and charm; and I had come to London only for the purpose of roaming about and for listening to the futile fuss of Kamran. True friends of childhood are just like tall shady trees which provide immense calm, comfort and relief to those who sit under their shade. For a moment, while I was embracing Kamran, I too had forgotten my burning wounds.

Suddenly, he detached me from himself, had a closer look at me and remarked, “Medi dear, why are you looking so weak?”

Giving him the handle of my suitcase I replied, “I wish I could give a similar opinion about you.”

Kamran laughed and boldly remarked, “Well my dear friend, you know very well that right from my childhood, whatever I eat, has a rapid and positive impact on my health. Now, do you plant to stand here and freeze to death, or do you wish to accompany me to my home?”

As Kamran stepped forward, I noticed that on the nearby bench, the English couple was still engrossed in each other under the cover of snow, quite indifferent to the whole world. Seeing the boy, Kamran heaved a long sigh and mumbled to himself, “I wonder why the standards of London blonds have gone so low these days.”

Taking long strides, Kamran was moving forward on the carpet of snow spread on the earth and was leaving behind his foot marks on the snow. Like an enchanted soul, I was simply walking behind him and following his footsteps. Kamran’s Morris Car was parked at a nearby place. My luggage was packed into the dickie and we left for Kamran’s flat.

CHAPTER 2

THE SAME EVENING AGAIN

In about an hour's time, we reached Kamran's flat situated in South London. By the time I took shower, Kamran had prepared breakfast. I was not feeling so hungry, but as usual, Kamran was busy displaying his traditional enthusiastic hospitality. After taking breakfast, I went to sleep while Kamran left for his restaurant.

Perhaps at four in the evening, I was awakened by some noise. Kamran's flat was situated in a posh area of London. It was in fact a long row of double-storey apartments built with red bricks. These apartments had been built in about eight or ten rows between very wide roads. Each row had eight double-storey apartments joined together in such a way that the orchards in front of all the houses could be seen together in a straight line. However, in order to create a separation between the houses, there was a beautiful red fence in the middle, which had been cut in a balanced form. Outside each house there was a beautiful post box, bearing the name of the owner of the house. I remembered my childhood days when during the drawing period, all the students in the class had to draw in their drawing copybooks a small house similar to this wooden postbox. With its balcony, the window of my room opened towards the back road. The slight noise that I could hear was also coming from the apartment of the second row built on the same back road. I opened the glass door that opened into the balcony and came out on the terrace. The snow fall had stopped but as far as I could look around, everything had been covered with snow. Across the road into a street, some children were busy making a snowman. The noise that I have just mentioned was being produced by their innocent laughters and loud argumentation. One group of children wished to fix a carrot in place of the man's nose while the other group wanted to use a wooden nail to improve the form of the nose. At last, both the groups unanimously agreed to use the carrot for this purpose and the snowman was given a hat, a muffler and a coat as well. The passersby stopped for a while, looked at what the children had made, smiled and went away. Now, it was getting dark; and like other winter evenings, that evening was also quickly merging into the night. The mothers of the children who were peeping at them through the doors and windows, began calling them and one after the other, the children begged leave from their playmates and went home. Perhaps, from their inside, all the mothers of the world are of the same type. They forbid their children to play in the darkness, urge them to return home before the setting of the sun and if they are late in returning, they (mothers) stand in the doors, windows and courtyards and call them loudly.

With the advancing evening, the intensity of cold was also increasing. The roadside coffee seller was presenting hot mugs of espresso coffee to the people who were passing by. The shivering couples stopped on their way for a while, gulped down hot coffee and then resumed their onward journey. Even at that moment, a beautiful young couple had stopped in front of the coffee stall for drinking coffee. With her large eyes, the girl was mischievously looking towards the boy from behind the steam that was rising out of the large mug of simmering coffee. While talking, she was continuously smiling. We the human beings have a very superficial approach and are quite incapable of looking beneath the surface of things. The steam that rises out from the coffee mug is visible to everyone but the smoke rising from the hearts of the people around us remains hidden from our eyes. There was now complete darkness all around and the roadside lamp posts had started emitting light. It was the same evening again and the same dark ominous shadows of old memories had once again surrounded me. It is said that evening is the time of the setting sun but the setting sun is not the only idea associated with the evening time. Evenings had always pressed heavily upon my nerves. During the whole of my life, I have never felt so much loneliness in any other part of the day or the night, as I have felt in the evening.

All of a sudden, the telephone placed in the lounge of the flat began ringing. From the other side, Kamran was speaking in his lively and cheerful voice, "O my prince of the fairyland of sadness, what about the supper? If you wish to go outside, get ready. I'll be back in half an hour's time. In

case you like to eat something at home, let me know; and I'll tell the driver to buy something on the way back."

"So now you've got a driver as well?" I asked in some surprise.

Kamran laughed in his typical style and replied, "The fact is that while driving back home from my café, I act as my own driver. When I tell others that I've got a driver, I only wish to impress them with my personality."

I uttered a few words in his condemnation and remarked while hanging up, "Kamran, you are simply incorrigible. I'm in no mood to go out. Let's have our dinner together here at home."

Within a short time, Kamran arrived home with all the essentials of the night meal. While driving back home, he had bought from the market some ready made food items. Soon, like a prudent housewife, he heated them and placed them on the table. After the meal, we had a course of coffee during which, Kamran finally said something which I had unconsciously been attempting to avoid since morning.

Taking a long sip of hot coffee, Kamran looked towards me quite attentively and said, "Medi dear, I never expected you to surrender so easily."

"When the enemy himself appears in the rival's camp and implores that this victory is the only asset of his life, people like me have to give in," I replied, while deliberately attempting not to look towards him.

My reply further increased Kamran's curiosity and restlessness instead of decreasing it. With a sense of frustration, he began to speak rather loudly, "I've never been able to understand your logic. For the sake of that girl, you revolted against the whole world and then, despite stiff opposition from your whole family, you remained firm and resolute and gallantly faced the storm. You were disowned by your father, your mother broke off her relationship with you and you were deprived of your home. What happened then all of a sudden which forced you to take a u-turn and give up so easily?"

A weak smile appeared on my lips. "Perhaps, the hardships and ordeals of time had made me realize that love is a folly and that those who abandon the ease and comfort of their homes and wander about in deserts and jungles for the sake of love are fools and nothing else."

Kamran stood up from the sofa, came close to me, placed his hand on my shoulder, bent and looked straight into my eyes. "Mr. Hammad Amjad Raza," he began to speak. "I know you since you were six years old. We've been together for the last twenty years. Our childhood and youth are evident to each other like a mirror. You are also included among those people who renounce the soft and warm beds of home and are driven from pillar to post. At the moment, you are tired. Go to bed now and we'll talk about the matter at some other time."

Kamran patted me on my back and went towards his room while I remained seated there in the easy chair in front of the window and continued to hear the typical sound of the falling snow on the branches of the trees which were bending down under the weight of snow. Outside, the sky had turned fiery red and inside the room, there was the sound of the snapping of wood in the fireplace and the shadows of rising flames on the wall. At this hour of the night, my mind traveled back to that evening two years ago, when I had my first meeting with Iman.

CHAPTER 3

THE BLUE SEASON OF LOVE

Our family was included among the most influential and most affluent families of the city. After retiring as Commissioner, my father began taking care of the vast agricultural lands that had once belonged to our forefathers. It is another thing that he could never become a landlord in the true sense of the word, because, the strict bureaucrat that lay hidden in him, always figured prominently in him and dominated his personality. My mother was the daughter of an eminent landlord and thus possessed all the characteristics of educated women belonging to the feudal class. Even her Master's degree in English Literature had failed to bring about any change in her personality. We were a happy and prosperous family of three brothers and a sister and were passing our life in our own typical fashion. My father had always been in close contact with the most important political figures of the country and every evening, our drawing room was filled with the incumbent ministers and members of the ruling class. Since childhood, it had been a matter of great astonishment for me that despite the frequent change of governments in the country, the same political faces could be seen in different forms in my father's drawing room. Perhaps, my father enjoyed friendly ties only with those politicians who were capable of always rocking in the cradle of power, whatever the circumstances might be. It was perhaps, due to this very reason that he had arranged the marriage of his eldest son Sajjad and his daughter Madiha into such ruling families. My sister Madiha was married to a boy belonging to a highly influential family of Sindh. Apparently, they belonged to Sindh, but their new generation had seen no other city of Pakistan except its capital Islamabad. Madiha had also started living in Islamabad after her marriage. My elder brother Sajjad was also married to a girl belonging to an aristocratic family of Punjab. My Brother's wife Abrina was always keen and anxious to prove that her high class family was in no way inferior to ours. My brother Sajjad was always so busy in his business affairs and foreign tours that he could hardly ever spare some time for his wife. Consequently, she and my mother kept themselves busy in making arrangements for all the family parties and functions. As far as I (Hammad Amjad) and my younger brother Ibad (who was the darling of the whole family) were concerned, we did not have the least interest in the noisy activities and festivities of our home. I had recently got Master's degree and Ibad had also completed his graduation. Right from the beginning, I had never been interested in leading my life according to some particular plan or discipline and, therefore, despite the repeated insistence of my father, I had not yet agreed to assist him in his business affairs. For this very reason, he was somewhat annoyed with me in those days. On the other hand, Ibad had never wanted to do anything in Pakistan. He had always been obsessed with the desire of settling abroad but he was too shy to talk to Father on this matter in a decisive manner. Parties and get togethers were held most frequently in our house, under one pretext or the other. At times, I thought that we the rich people have got very few excuses for enjoyment and celebration. I have read somewhere that the rich are wrong to believe that the poor are happier than they and in the same way, the poor are wrong in their opinion that the rich are leading a happier life than theirs. Perhaps, someone has said it very rightly.

Another party had been arranged at our house on that day on the pretext that the only son of my brother Sajjad had completed the first Para (Part) of the Holy Quran. In imitation of one another, it is becoming a common fashion in the rich families to employ some Maulvi in order to teach the Quran to the children in the evening. Or, it might have been the outcome of the strict training and upbringing which my father had received from his father in his childhood. Whatever the reason was, he ordered Brother Sajjad to arrange some Maulvi who could come in the evening and teach the Holy Quran to his little son Sunny. It is another thing that on most days of the month, the Maulvi had to return home from the gate of our bungalow without teaching anything because of some party or ceremony being held inside. How could be a simple minded poor Maulvi and his old-fashioned bicycle could be fitted into the clamour and glamour of the highly sophisticated parties? Abrina (My brother's wife) herself strongly disapproved the coming of this type of Maulvi to teach her son but who could speak out against the dictates of our father? Thus, quite unwillingly, this formality was

being observed. I wonder why we the rich are so far away from such formalities while the poor are so near to them. While we treat religion as a mere formality, the poor observe every formality as a part of religion.

On a couple of occasions, I myself had an informal exchange of greetings with this Maulvi outside the home on the way as well as in that part of the lounge where he used to sit and teach Sunny. Maulvi Alimuddin was a simple man, having a thin and lean body, and an impressive looking bright face. He used to wear spectacles and was always dressed in white clothes consisting of Kurta Pajama (Shirt and trousers). He was a quiet sort of person having a dignified appearance and always liked to lower his head and eyes while talking. Daily at four in the evening, he arrived on his old-fashioned Rally Bicycle and silently sat wherever he was told to sit by the servants, and waited for Sunny to come down. I always wondered how he was able to control a naughty little child like Sunny. I had personally seen the way in which Sunny had always been giving a very tough time to the rest of his home tutors. But quite unexpectedly, he always sat in a respectful and decent manner in front of the Maulvi. On one or two occasions, I secretly attempted to incite Sunny to make some mischief with the Maulvi, but Sunny remained unaffected.

Sunny had successfully finished the first Para (Part) of the Holy Quran and to mark this occasion, a party was being held in the house that evening. As Sunny was the cause of the party, he had requested the organizers of the party to invite his teacher the Maulvi along with other guests. He had threatened that if his request was not granted, he would stay away from the party and would not wear the dress of his mama's choice. Initially, this request of Sunny was bitterly criticized by my mother and Abrina. How could a poor old man having a long white beard be accommodated in a modern party being attended by all the prominent ladies of the city, who were expected to arrive wearing dazzling dresses and sophisticated jewellery, accompanied by their domesticated and henpecked husbands, in their long majestic cars of the latest model? It was like a patch of coarse rug in a velvet sheet, or like a fly in the ointment.

But no one had ever been able to stand against the obstinacy of Sunny and the same thing happened that evening. At last, it were the ladies of the house who had to yield. However, another problem arose which brought fresh tears into the eyes of Sunny. During the previous evening, the domestic servants had already informed the Maulvi about the party and told him not to come the next evening. Thus, there was no chance of his coming and attending the party. As Sunny wept and cried, it was revealed that my father's special driver Shakir knew the Maulvi's address, because, once he too lived in that old locality of the city where Maulvi Alimuddin was still living. It was decided that Shakir would go and formally invite the Maulvi and his family to attend the party. Sunny was still somewhat doubtful about the matter and, therefore, he also accompanied Shakir in his car to the Maulvi's house. The time fixed for the start of the party had almost come. There was already some delay while we were all waiting for the Maulvi's arrival. At that time, I was indolently lying on the bed in my room and changing the channels of the TV placed in front of me. All of a sudden, my younger brother Ibad opened the door and burst into the room. Addressing me he said, "Hi Big B! Are you in no mood of coming downstairs? The party has already started.?"

As usual, Ibad was dressed in a suit and matching bow for the evening party. Seeing him, I laughed quite spontaneously.

"Well Ibad, the way you've got ready for the party suggests that the issue of your marriage is finally going to be decided this evening."

"Come on Big B. You know I always love to remain smart and well-dressed," replied Ibad with an unpleasant expression on his face.

I switched off the television with its remote and threw the pillow towards Ibad

"I know all about your elegant dresses and your smartness. In this spick and span condition, you must be going to the party in order to welcome some new love. I wonder if all the girls of the city are suffering from the inflammation of eyes. Otherwise, how could they ever look towards you?"

“You must have heard the old proverb, a prophet is never honoured in his own country. Same is the case with me. You people are not aware of my real worth,” replied Ibad with a big laugh and added, “Anyhow, get ready as soon as you can. The Commissioner has issued strict orders that all the people should be present downstairs.”

While we were alone, Ibad and I used to refer to our father as “Commissioner”. I was somewhat annoyed and disgusted and said, “O my God! What the hell is this all about! Why is an innocent and trivial formality relating to a child being so much exaggerated into an ostentatious public affair? Daily, all over the world, thousands of children finish the whole Quran and learn it by heart, but nowhere is it so much publicized. I’m simply fed up with the parties on such occasions.”

“Come on Big B! Don’t get upset, be a support,” remarked Ibad in a way as if he were trying to make me understand the situation. “I also know that it’s only a pretentious affair. But if not for the sake of someone else, do come downstairs at least for the innocent delight of Sunny. He is so much attached to you.”

Ibad shut the door and went downstairs. He knew very well that I would surely attend the party for Sunny’s pleasure, though with an unwilling heart.

Perhaps, pleasing some of our dear ones serves as the basic motive in ninety per cent decisions of our life. We lead only a small fraction of our life for ourselves. Most of our life is consumed in pleasing others.

CHAPTER 4

THE SAME LOVE AGAIN

In the cantonment area of the city, eminent members of aristocracy have got magnificent houses, each of which is spread over several acres of land. In the same vicinity, there is a road having trees on both sides. At the end of the road, there is a grand mansion belonging to the retired Commissioner Amjad Raza. Once again that evening, it was glittering with the light of electric bulbs. The heat of the sun had gone but the evening had not yet spread its wings. The Commissioner's old Mercedes Car which was now mostly used for domestic purposes, soon appeared from some distance. It was being driven by our oldest driver Shakir. With an expression of immense delight, Mr. Sunny was sitting in the car as if he had returned from a highly successful adventure. Seated on the back seat were two extremely shy girls clad in white shawls clinging together. However, there was no sign of Maulvi Alimuddin. Before reaching near the large fenced gate, the driver blew the horn twice in his peculiar fashion to announce his arrival. Receiving this signal, two servants rushed out of a wooden cabin, that had been built along the huge gate having iron fences. They opened the gate before the car could reach there. The blue Mercedes of the Commissioner swiftly entered the house.

By the time I got ready and reached the party hall downstairs, almost all the guests had arrived. As soon as he saw me from a distance, Sunny waved his hand as if he had got something very important to tell me. But at that moment, he was completely surrounded by his friends and cousins and, therefore, it was impossible for him to come closer to me. As usual, Ibad was making best possible attempts to impress the ladies, their daughters and other girls. In another corner of the room, Father and Brother Sajjad were busy in striking business deals with some eminent figures of the business community. Father was always keen to grasp such opportunities for promoting his business. There was a considerable hustle and bustle in the hall which seemed to be flooded with lights and colours. In this festive atmosphere, Mother and Abrina were busy using all possible ways and means of impressing the invited ladies. They were talking about the latest jewellery, upcoming fashions and plans of spending the summer vacation in France or Switzerland. Such colourful discussions and glamorous dresses were giving the impression that the grand show had been arranged to celebrate Sunny's marriage instead of his completion of the first Para of the Holy Quran. While coming downstairs, I had received salutations and greetings from several dreamful eyes, but as Kamran had once said, I had been extremely ungrateful in such matters. For some unknown reasons, the idea of love and romance always made me laugh. I had not even formally liked women the way in which they are generally described in our common romantic stories. Perhaps, one of its major reasons was that throughout my academic career I had received co-education and ever since my childhood, girls had been my best friends with whom I had spent a sufficient amount of time in their toy rooms (in childhood), study rooms (in adolescence) and bedrooms (in youth). Thus for me, all the girls attending the party were mere girls and nothing else. They were just like a large number of class fellows living together in a hostel. I knew all of them very well and same was the case with them. I had acted as a trustworthy confidant for many of them. But I wonder why I could never realize the fact that all these girls had now crossed the boundaries of childhood and adolescence and reached their youth, where each of them required only one man who could become their husband and serve as their only confidant. All of them were the daughters of the members of gentry and those bureaucrats who had retired with my father. To have a glimpse of the youthful and modern beauty of these girls, ordinary college boys spent the whole day wandering through the streets of the cantonment area. But I had been so close to this beauty that its observation had become a routine matter for me. To be more truthful and honest, I had never liked to be restless for the sake of a person who is almost similar to me. The fact is that most of the girls who came into my life were foolish, having the same type of styles and manners. In the presence of boys, they tried to look very serious and sober, but while they were in the company of other girls, they talked about the boys exactly as we boys talked about them when we were alone.

As I was coming down stairs, the first girl who seized me was Lubna the daughter of Mrs. Ishrat. "O Medi! Where do you live these days? What an indifference! What an insensitivity!"

"I've heard that one must keep oneself at an arm's length from the beautiful maidens," I replied rather teasingly.

"O You naughty boy!" she remarked with a smile and added, "Are you coming to our home on Thursday to attend Salma's engagement party?"

Lubna's sister Salma was younger than her by one year. I looked towards her in utter astonishment and asked, "Is Salma going to be engaged?"

"Yes, she's going to be engaged," replied Lubna quite frankly.

"But what about those promises which Salma had made with me?" I asked her.

Lubna turned around, looked towards me and began to speak in a romantic tone, "As far as those promises are concerned, she has transferred those promises to me and I'm prepared to wait for their fulfillment, till I become an old woman. Do tell me now, will you come to us on Thursday?"

In the meantime, Maria and Humera arrived there from different directions. They strongly disapproved my standing there all alone with Lubna. Humera was aware of the fact that I was very fond of black dress. For this reason, just to attract my attention on that occasion, she was wearing a black Sari; and to be honest, her white colour matched well with the black Sari.

As usual, Maria was wearing flippers and a tight shirt of the latest fashion. "Medi," she began to speak in a rather proud tone. "You seem to have locked yourself indoors after the completion of your university studies. You are meeting me tomorrow evening. I've got several things to tell you. No excuses."

Standing at some distance, Naila and Pinky were angrily glaring at me while I was talking to Maria. The threatening gestures which they were making to me suggested that they were determined to take me to task, whenever they got the opportunity to see me alone.

It is surprising to note that whenever all those girls were alone, they had the same type of secrets to reveal, the same complaints to make and the same words to say. Perhaps, all the girls of the world were created at the same place and with the same material. Whenever they got a chance of meeting me alone, all of them complained that after the completion of my studies, I had stopped paying attention towards them. Under one pretext or the other, they repeatedly held my hand, showed the signs of annoyance and finally, they themselves changed their mood and became friendly again. All of them had the same type of romanticism to show. They vigorously complained that I had never attempted to know what I actually meant for them. They all protested that while I was indifferent towards them, with utmost love and care, they had preserved in their hearts the blissful memories of the time that I had spent with them in their childhood and adolescence.

At times, I was amazed to think about the deep rooted impacts of the childhood memories and childhood romances in the minds of these girls. It appears that during their childhood, girls make innocent friendships with the boys only in the hope of making them the prince of their dreams in their youth.

Anyhow, till that time, I was totally unaware of the true meanings of this romanticism. I did not know what an honour it is to be the beloved of someone. People spend their whole life in making love but only the chosen few are fortunate enough to be blessed with the prestigious honour of being the beloved of someone. Most of us spend most of our lives struggling to make others our own beloved, because, we do not have the power to become the beloved of someone else. It is a unique honour which descends from the heavens on a few fortunate souls, but quite ironically, those who are blessed with this honour, are themselves unaware of its true value and sanctity.

In a cheerful mood, I continued to march forward among the guests, meeting all of them, flirting with the beautiful girls and exchanging jokes with them. Till that moment, I was quite unaware that very soon, I was going to be caught up in the blue season of love, which seemed to be hovering around me for centuries, waiting for a suitable opportunity to overwhelm me. Then, all of a sudden, I felt as if my feet had been glued to the wooden floor of the hall. All the noise and clamour and the

enchanted music of the silvery laughs were suddenly brought to a halt. Everything stood still and it appeared as if with the help of a magical remote, someone had cast a spell on the whole gathering, making it motionless. She was sitting in front of me in a confused, frightened and petrified condition, under the cover of her long white Dupatta (head covering or stole). She was attempting to protect herself from the eyes of the men who were passing by. In this process, with the mixture of pink colour, her gold like colour was further warming up. For a moment, she lifted her thick black eyebrows and forever, I was drowned into the ocean of those eyes. What a drastic change occurred in the twinkling of an eye. If people describe such events as sudden attacks of cupid, it was indeed the most merciless and most relentless attack that I had ever experienced in my life. I knew not, who that girl was, clad in white dress. When compared to her exquisitely delicate appearance, the whole gathering appeared to be a coarse rug while she herself looked like a patch of velvet in that rug. It does not mean that she was the only beautiful girl present on the occasion. The party was in fact, a grand panorama of stunning beauties who were capable of attracting and detracting anyone at any time. But there was something unique and rare in this girl who was sitting silently and shyly in one corner of the room, beside another girl who looked a bit younger having a somewhat similar appearance. From her long dark hair to her dainty little shoes, she seemed to be a whole world in herself. In utter amazement, the men and women who were passing by, looked towards these two girls, who were apparently, a big misfit for the party.

All at once, I realized that the sleeve of my coat was being pulled by a tiny little hand, which abruptly brought me out of the current of my thoughts. Perhaps, for a long time, Sunny had been calling me. "Uncle, Medi Uncle, please listen to me."

I looked towards him but in reality, I was still completely absorbed in that girl. Sunny seemed somewhat annoyed with me. "Go away uncle, I won't talk to you," he said rather angrily and continued, "Everyone else has given me gifts today. But you haven't yet---."

Before he could complete his sentence, I picked him up in my both hands and made him sit on a nearby table.

"Sunny dear, how is it possible for your Medi Uncle not to give you some gift today? Tell me what you want from me."

An innocent joy appeared on Sunny's face and he began to think quite seriously.

"I want a new play station along with two jockeys," he said after a pause.

"It's O.K. It will be in your room by tomorrow," I said in an assuring manner. "Are you happy now?" I asked.

"O Uncle, you are really great!" Shouted Sunny, with a great deal of excitement.

After this, I came to the real point which I wished to discuss with him. "But Sunny dear, I can see some new faces in your party today. You haven't yet introduced me to them."

While saying this, I pointed towards the two girls sitting at some distance.

"Well, they are Iman and Haya, the daughters of my Maulvi. They have specially come here this evening only for my sake."

While Sunny was explaining the matter, I was constantly looking towards that girl who possessed killing beauty. It was revealed to me that when Shakir and Sunny went to the Maulvi's house, they were told that the Maulvi had been suffering from fever since the previous night and, therefore, it was impossible for him to attend the party. However, the obstinate Sunny insisted that if no member of the Maulvi's family attended the party, he would have the party postponed. In fact, on a number of occasions in the past, when the weather was not good or when there was something wrong with the Maulvi's only bicycle, Sunny had accompanied the driver Shakir to drop the Maulvi at his house. Moreover, whenever the Maulvi went back home accompanied by Sunny in the Commissioner's car, he never let Sunny go back without drinking the home made lemon juice, which was Sunny's favourite drink. This drink was made by the Maulvi's elder daughter Iman. Thus, the Maulvi's wife and his daughters had become quite intimate with Sunny and Sunny also had the same feelings of intimacy for them. Perhaps, due to this very reason, the Maulvi had to succumb to the obstinacy of

Sunny that evening. The Maulvi's wife was always horrified by the idea of attending such parties and, therefore, she suggested that Haya should be sent with Sunny to attend the party. Generally, the Maulvi strongly disliked such things but after thinking something, he allowed Haya to go with Sunny for some time. But Haya refused to go alone to the party. At last, the old driver Shakir who had been standing outside for a long time, waiting for Sunny to come, himself came to the door and assured the sick Maulvi that he had no cause to worry, because, both Haya and Iman were just like his own daughters, who had been brought up in his own hands. He requested the Maulvi to allow his daughters to go with Sunny and attend the party, though for a short time. Shakir promised to bring them back home immediately after the party. As far as Haya was concerned, the Maulvi had already agreed to send her with Sunny, but Iman's case was different. She had never stepped out of her home alone ever since she had entered her youth. At last, for some unknown reason, he agreed to Shakir's proposal. Perhaps, he wanted to show some regard for Shakir who had been his old neighbour in the same locality. Or perhaps, he did not like to break the heart of the little Sunny. But quite restlessly, he continued to walk in the courtyard and in the street near the car, till at last, both the girls were seated comfortably inside the car. Even at the time when Shakir set the car into motion, the Maulvi again repeated the instructions which he had already given him several times.

We do not have the least notion of the sudden, unexpected events and accidents, which may lie in store for us, anywhere and at any moment. I personally believe that love is the greatest accident which may occur in our life at any moment, while we the human beings are so innocent and helpless that we always blame the words "if only" for all such accidents. If only I had not been at home that evening. If only the Maulvi had not been ill that day. If only Sunny himself had not gone to the Maulvi's house to invite him to the party. If only the Maulvi had not allowed Iman to accompany her sister Haya to the party. If only, if only.

I have forgotten everything that happened at the party afterwards. Perhaps, I was no longer in my senses. When for the second time, I looked towards the place where Iman and Haya had been sitting clinging together, the place was vacant and there was no sign of either of them in the whole gathering. I was told that both of them had gone. As Shakir had promised with the Maulvi to bring back the girls before the Maghrib Prayer, they had sent a message to him, urging him to take them back even before the party had ended. They had departed from the scene while I could do nothing except scolding my fate.

It appeared as if while going back to her home, Iman had taken along with her a large chunk of my existence. Till a short while ago, the party seemed to be flooded with colours and lights, sparkling with smiles and echoing with laughter. But all of a sudden, it seemed desolate, deserted and devastated as if someone had squeezed out of it, all of its colours. Strange indeed is the alchemy of love, because at times, with the presence of some loved one, a huge crowd of strangers seems to be intimate, while at the very next moment with the departure of the beloved, it becomes dull, drab and alien. Mine was totally a one-sided affair because all the storms were raging only in my heart whereas Iman was totally unaware of them. If people describe such feelings as love, then exactly the same feelings of love were circulating with my blood. Could this love be so powerful as to change all of my feelings, passions, styles and sensibilities so dramatically and drastically, in spite of being a purely one-sided affair?

CHAPTER 5

LONDON IS SAD

It is said that sleep is the worst of all the thieves because, it steals away half of man's life. But it appeared to me as if even this thief of mine was annoyed with me.

Perhaps, at some late hour in the night, Kamran looked into the lounge, found me lying in the easy chair with closed eyes near the fireplace and put a blanket on me. The whole night was spent in the same condition while I remained lost into the shadowy memories of the past. The darkness of the night was finally replaced by the light of the morning. After the continuous snowfall of the night, the sky had become clear. During the breakfast, Kamran offered that he would drop me at the Kingston University, on his way to the restaurant. But I told him that at about eleven or eleven thirty, I would myself leave home for the university. Kamran went to his restaurant because, he had to reach there quite early in order to start the day's business. I, however, was in no mood of going out so early in the morning. Moreover, London was by no means a new or unknown city for me. I felt a strange type of familiarity and intimacy with this city. One of its reasons might be the resemblance of its weather with that of my native city Quetta. Another point of similarity between the two cities is the style of their old buildings. The old city of London has several old buildings which were constructed before the partition of India. Some of them have a striking resemblance with the buildings which had been built in Quetta before the earthquake of 1935. Perhaps, it is mainly due to the fact that before the partition of India, Quetta was a major cantonment of the British Empire, and while constructing the city, the English architects and builders might have in their minds the city of London, especially with reference to the direction of bricks, the outer structure of the buildings and its long vast roads. This phenomenon was not merely confined to my native city of Quetta. While observing the style of buildings in all the cities, especially those in the colder regions, which remained under British occupation, we notice the same type of tradition in their construction. The same red tin roofs, the same typical balconies and grates and the same type of fireplaces and the cornices built over them. In the same way, we find in them, the same type of large wooden doors with large boards carved on them in the form of the English digit 7. Furthermore, in most such buildings, we find the same high roofs having large ventilators in them along which ropes were hung for opening and closing them. For this very reason, even today, while walking through the streets of old London, you will feel as if you are passing through some cantonment area of the pre-partition Sub-Continent.

By the time I left the house, the sun had started shining brightly. The snow removing machines had removed all the snow from the roads and put it on the edges. The sun that comes out after the snowfall always shines very brightly. Same was the case with that morning. It appeared as if the invisible hand of Nature had whitewashed all the nearby things. The road built with the paved bricks of a peculiar colour appeared to be shining. A particular kind of brightness could be observed on the faces of the people. Strange indeed are the various ways in which the weather affects the people. At times, without any reason, it makes the man happy or sad all of a sudden. But for me, every type of weather seemed to be full of sadness and London too, appeared dull and sad to me. I was surrounded by an ominous sadness, in spite of the bright sunshine and the cheerful faces of the people all around me.

After coming out of the flat, I began walking towards the subway of the third street. The brightness of the sun had compelled me to wear dark black sunglasses. I wish man could invent such dark coloured spectacles as could protect our eyes from the blazing and blinding glares of pains and sorrows.

At the end of the street, there was a Spanish girl playing some tune on her guitar. In front of her there lay a large black case of the same guitar. Those who were passing by, stopped there for a while, listened to the melodious tune, put some coins into the case and resumed their onward journey. What an honourable way of begging it was. Some people beg in such a way that people give them something thinking it to be their due right. But there are some others who demand their due rights in such a way that those who give them, believe that they are giving something in charity to a beggar.

The girl looked towards me with a smile and greeted me with the bowing of her head. At that time, she was playing on her guitar the tune of a popular Spanish romantic song which meant "O my beloved, ever since your departure, every scene is dull, dreary and drab, and every city seems deserted."

In astonishment I looked towards that girl and wondered how she had come to know about the feelings of my heart. Perhaps, all those who pass through the experience of failing in their love, have the same type of impressions on their faces which can be read by the keen observers. I plunged my hand into the pocket, brought out as many coins as I could hold and put them into the girl's guitar box and walked forward.

There was not so much rush in the subway. The underground railway station was shining with different lights and only a small number of people were standing there, waiting for the train. The absence of rush on the railway station was due to the fact that it was eleven thirty at that time and it was not a rush hour. At its fixed time, the train entered the subway, with its peculiar roar. As its automatic doors opened, I and the rest of the passengers boarded the train. Sometimes, I think that man has really made wonderful inventions for the convenience of man. Perhaps, 99 per cent of our life is indebted to or dependent on such useful inventions ranging from a tiny needle to a huge aeroplane. All these things which we use so frequently in our daily life have been made for us by someone else. By spending only a few coins, we can benefit from the peace and comfort of all these inventions. Perhaps, this is why, the getting of coins has become so difficult.

However, the getting of this peace is not just conditional to the coins. Peace of the heart is a rare feeling of this universe, which can be realized only by those who themselves have lost the peace of their heart. How foolish we the human beings are. As long as we are in control of the peace of our heart, we wander through the streets to lose it. Every eye has got only one aim, objective and destination, that is, some sweetheart or beloved. But when the same beloved or sweetheart snatches away our peace of heart. We keep on remembering him and calling upon him all the time.

While I was still completely engrossed in all such jumbled thoughts, without my being aware of it, the tube train entered my desired subway station and stopped. Quite fortunately, during the last few moments, I was able to see the brilliantly shining neon sign on which the sparkling sign of the digit 17 Downing Street could be seen. I suddenly sprang back into my senses and rushed out of the train and came down before the shutting of its doors again. I climbed up the stairs and reached the upper road from where I was supposed to take one of the famous number 9 red Double Decker buses of London, which would take me to the university gate.

London was exactly the same as I had left it two years ago. In front of the bus stop, the same old banyan tree was still standing majestically and smiling as if to welcome me again. The English people are very much careful about such things. A few years ago, only to save this old banyan tree, they changed London's Master Plan and altered the direction of the road which passed through this way. The reason was that if the road had been built in accordance with the original London Master Plan, this tree would surely have to be cut down. The English are a deeply conservative and traditionalist nation and are not ready to give up their old memories and traditions so easily. Instead, they even put their lives in danger to preserve their past heritage. This is one of the reasons which enabled them to rule over the world for so many years. It is absolutely true that nations do not become great overnight. For achieving this greatness, they have to cover a journey of centuries full of tough training and practical experiences.

Within a few moments, my required red double Decker bus slowly arrived at the bus stop and halted. I boarded the bus which began its journey towards the university. On the way to the university, there lay my old friend, confidant and benefactor River Thames. Several evenings of my adolescence and numerous nights of my youth were spent on the beautiful wooden benches along the bank of this river. As the memories of all those pleasant moments crowded back into my mind, the whole thing seemed to be a dream. I could still vividly remember the picnics with my friends, the countless flirtations and immature love affairs. It appeared to me that on seeing me back in London,

River Thames had been immensely pleased, and its water seemed to be flowing ecstatically. The bus was traveling on the wide road built along the river while the river was running along with us, exactly like those poor little children who like to run along a brilliant new car or any other huge vehicle that enters their old street. Trees, buildings, Weathers Rivers and other such things around us get the opportunity of observing us in different forms and conditions. They see us while we are smiling or weeping, enjoying or suffering. In fact no aspect of our life is hidden from the eyes of our surrounding environment. Perhaps, due to this very reason we have the feeling that these things also become happy and sad along with us. Perhaps, every outside weather is linked to our inside weather.

The bus stopped at the gate of the university and I entered the university through its huge iron fenced gate and began to walk on the red road made with bricks. This building consisted of large grassy plots which were irrigated by a small branch of river Thames. Big tall trees could be seen all around, as far as one could see. On account of the overnight snow, these trees seemed to be clad in white dresses, just like some old saints. There was a slab like layer of transparent snow on the surface of the water. Beneath it, the flowing river water was clearly visible.

The central building of the university was built with white marble. In this snowy atmosphere, its long high pillars and the rest of the building also seemed to be made of snow. I got the forms from the admin department and filled them up. I was told that my classes were to start after two days. I came to know that the head of the department was a Jew Mr. Isaac who was also the vice chancellor of the university. I wanted to meet him but I was told that after the eleven o'clock class, he had gone to attend an educational conference in the city where he had been invited as the chief guest. There was no justification for my further stay at the university. I, therefore, took the return bus from the same way and reached the subway. It was two-thirty at noon, and according to the office schedule it was the lunch hour for the office workers. As a result, there was a greater rush in the subway, as compared to the morning. I was not feeling so hungry at that time. Even then, I went to a nearby restaurant to have my lunch consisting of coffee and sandwiches. Nature has made elaborate arrangements to make man realize his insignificance and worthlessness on several occasions in his life. One such occasion is hunger which makes everyone so helpless and miserable. Even the most powerful among men are utterly helpless against it.

Even the dearest of our relationships cannot remove the feeling of hunger. Almost daily in our life, we see our near and dear ones dying and leaving us forever. On such occasions, we ourselves feel almost half dead and our feelings of hunger and thirst also vanish. For the time being we wish to be buried in the grave along with the dead person and we have the feeling that even if we remain alive, we shall never be able to lead a normal life. At this moment, every feeling of the heart seems to have turned into dust. However, only after a short period of one or two days, our stomach resumes its normal functioning to make us realize our utter insignificance and our helplessness in the face of hunger and thirst. When the pangs of hunger begin to tease us, we start hating ourselves and feeling ashamed of ourselves, because, only a short while ago, we were making tall claims of becoming dust with dust and of our desire to renounce the whole world and whatever belongs to it. But then we realize that no other creature is more helpless than man. However, on such occasions, we are able to benefit from the self-made rules of other people like us and thus, some of our honour and self-respect remains intact. Someone states that no food would be cooked for three days in the house of the bereaved family. Someone else promises to provide meals to the members of the bereaved family on the first day. Some others promise to do the same on the second and third days, because, they are fully aware of the fact that one day or the other, the same mournful tragedy might take place in their house and on such occasion, all these people would be present there to solace and comfort them in this hour of agony and would thus, assist them in preserving some of their honour and self-respect. Someone has rightly said that man is a social animal.

By the time I reached home, it was evening and the sun was setting. The naughty little children who had made a snowman during the previous evening had once again gathered in the street to collect the remnants of the snowman. Like some cruel beloved, the sunshine of the winter evenings

also turns away its face all of a sudden. The amount of coldness was increasing in the air and people had turned up the collars of their overcoats to protect themselves from the biting cold. Steam could be seen coming out of their lips while they were breathing and talking. The Spanish girl had put her guitar into the box and was now ready for departure. As I saw her, a glitter of familiarity was seen in her eyes. A faint smile appeared on her lips. I greeted her with the bowing of my head and continued my onward journey. Kamran returned home quite early in the evening and we decided to have our dinner at a roadside restaurant in the other block. The restaurant was small but peaceful. While we were having the sips of soup, sitting around a table in one corner of the restaurant, Kamran had a close and careful observation of the girls and women sitting around us in the restaurant and gave his final judgment about them. "Men marry women hoping that they would always remain the same as they are at the time of marriage. Women on the other hand marry men in the hope that they would change after marriage. But alas! Both of them have to be disappointed afterwards," he concluded.

I looked attentively towards him and remarked, "Perhaps, that's why you haven't got married yet."

"don't worry about me," said Kamran with a smile and added, "tell me how was your day spent at the university?"

I picked up a napkin from the table, dried my lips and said, "There was nothing special. I only managed to fill up my forms, but could not meet the head of the department, because he was not present at the University."

"I think you are talking about Mr. Isaac," said Kamran and continued, "Nowadays, he is often mentioned in the press. I wonder how a diehard Jew like him allowed the admission of a Pakistani Muslim in his university. Beware of him."

"Why, is he a cannibal who would eat me up?" I asked with a laugh.

Kamran was quite serious. "Perhaps, you are not yet aware of the true nature of these Jews. They can never be the real well-wishers of the Muslims. This fact can be best realized and understood by the Muslims like us who are living abroad and who have to face the hatred and competition from the Jews, at every step in all our business affairs. As a matter of fact, at the moment, Jews are completely dominating us in business."

"But have you or other business communities ever contemplated on the reasons and factors which have contributed to the great success of Jews in the financial world?" I asked.

Kamran took a long deep breath and said, "The matter is quite clear. A Jew never speaks harshly, bitterly or angrily; and you know very well that courtesy and politeness are the basic principles of success in business. Even in the most difficult circumstances, a Jewish businessman always retains his typical smile on his lips. Another important secret of their success is that every Jewish businessman and trader always takes care of the interests of other members of his community. Suppose two Jewish traders are deadly opposed to each other. But even in these circumstances, if a customer comes to the first Jew and demands something which he (The first Jew) does not have, he (the first Jew) does not feel the least hesitation in taking the customer to the second Jew although he is his bitter enemy. He readily takes the customer to his enemy and tells him (the customer) that he can get his required thing from him. One Jew can never introduce a client to a non-Jew. This is the main secret of the rapid growth of Jewish trade in the world."

To a certain extent, I agreed to the views expressed by Kamran but in my opinion, he had not yet mentioned the most important quality of Jews.

"You have forgotten to mention their most important quality, that is, their honesty. It is true that our traders are not so polite and cool-minded. It is also true that we are always busy pulling one another's legs. We staunchly adhere to the principle that we may get some benefit or not in a deal, but we must spare no effort in harming others. Dishonesty is the main cause of our lagging behind in trade. Jews are not dishonest in their business and trade and I believe that this is the most important secret of their marvelous success in this field."

After having our dinner, both of us started walking towards our apartment. The festival of Christmas was drawing near and quite naturally, the rush of shoppers in the market was also

increasing. Christmas trees with their peculiar flickering lights could be seen at numerous places. Quite indifferent to the severe cold weather, people clad in warm clothes, were buying the things of their choice from the sparkling shops around them. Perhaps, all festivals of the world are of the same type. All festivals are related to the joy of the heart and all festivals are most eagerly awaited by the children. Perhaps, due to this very reason, children formed the bulk of the crowd of people in the markets at that time of the night. I can still remember that while we were children, it was hard for us to sleep during several nights before the moon night and the Eid night and we could not sleep even for a single moment during the Eid night. We used to spend the whole moon night imagining and anticipating the joy of receiving Eid Money from our elders. The joy of spending that money was much more than that. But the whole Eid day used to slip out of our hands as sand slips out of a closed fist. Perhaps, the shortness of the festivals is a major cause of their success and preciousness for those who anticipate and celebrate them so cherishingly. Joy was writ large on the faces of all the people who were walking around. Faces are no doubt, wonderful mirrors and index of the mind.

As soon as we arrived back home, Kamran went to bed because he had to leave for his restaurant quite early the next morning. That day, he had not spoken even a single word on the topic of Iman. He had been my close intimate friend since childhood and knew very well that I myself would reveal everything to him, as soon as I could fully recover. He knew that it would be useless to ask me anything before that time. Before switching off the light, I made an unsuccessful attempt to read some of the magazines placed on the side table of my bed. At last, I switched off the light. But as soon as I did so it appeared as if the lights of my mind were turned on and I once again found myself completely overwhelmed with old memories. Memories may be bitter or pleasant, but in both the cases they are surely a big torment.

CHAPTER 6

IMAN

The ceremony accompanied by prayers, marking Sunny's completion of the first Para of the Holy Quran was over, but it brought about a dramatic and drastic change in my whole life. I was at a loss to understand the exact nature of this uneasiness. Despite the availability of everything, I was feeling utterly distressed, depressed, empty handed and helpless. My heart had been deprived of all its peace and calm. Whenever I was in a crowd, I rushed away in search of loneliness and while I was alone, I would go to the lounge and sit there, disturbed and confused. The Maulvi's illness prolonged, because, on account of that day's restlessness, his fever had become worse. As a result, for the next full week, he could not come to teach Sunny and during this period, I was gripped by the feeling that something very important and very precious was being taken away from me.

It was a hot evening in the same week; and I was lying with my eyes shut, in an easy chair, placed under the trees in the lawn of our house. How long the summer afternoons are. It appears as if the sun has become stationary at a single point, or perhaps, some foolish headed persons like me are unduly agitated at their apparent longevity. But those who are fortunate enough to be able to meet their beloveds, must always be eagerly anticipating and praying for the coming of such long summer afternoons. While I was still lost in my reverie, Sunny arrived there in a very cheerful mood, accompanied by Shakir the driver. Shakir was carrying two thermoses, while Sunny was holding a basket full of fruit. Seeing me in the lawn, he came to me running

"Uncle, look, what a huge quantity of ice cream I have collected."

Saying this, he pointed towards the huge sized thermoses in Shakir's hands.

I pulled Sunny's ears and said, "So that's it, you seem to be celebrating picnic quite secretly without the knowledge of your mother."

"No Uncle, Mama and grandma went for shopping a long time ago. "We're taking all these things for the Maulvi."

Hearing the Maulvi's name, I at once became alert.

"What do you mean? Has the doctor advised the Maulvi to eat a lot of ice cream, while he is suffering from high fever?"

Sunny laughed and said, "O Uncle! What a funny thing you have said. As far as the Maulvi is concerned, we're taking this basket of fruit for him; and this ice cream is for Iman and Haya. Is it clear now, Uncle?"

At this point, Shakir interrupted our conversation and said to me, "Please make Sunny understand something. If his father comes to know of it, he'll be extremely angry. But Sunny is continuously insisting and at this time, no other older member of the family is at home to give us the permission to go to the Maulvi's house."

Sunny made a rather unhappy face and began to speak. "The Maulvi has taught us that if someone is ill, we should go to ask about his health. If we do so, Allah will give us a huge reward. Why to seek someone's permission in the matter of getting reward from Allah? What do you think Medi Uncle?"

"Then with some joy, Sunny's eyes began to sparkle and he held my hand. "You should also come with us Medi Uncle. We'll return soon."

I felt my heart into my throat. Sunny seemed to have read the thoughts of my heart. Shakir also agreed and said, "Yes Mr. Hammad, if you accompany us, it will also be helpful to me. Otherwise, you are well aware of the anger of Sunny's father."

Now, Sunny held my hand tightly and began pulling it. Soon, all three of us got into the car. While we were on our way, Shakir told the gatekeeper that Sunny was going somewhere with his Medi Uncle and would be back in an hour's time. Perhaps, he intentionally did not mention the Maulvi's house, because, he knew well that the members of my family strongly dislike such things and firmly believe that the rich and the poor must live at some distance from each other. But Sunny's innocent mind was still far away from such hypocritical class differences and divisions. As far as I was

concerned, Shakir had known me since the time when I was a little child like Sunny. During my childhood, while returning from school, I used to make the same type of unreasonable demands from Shakir. Sometimes, I demanded cold ice balls from a stall outside the school, or an ice bar having salt and milk, kept in a box on a wheel barrow. At other times, I insisted on buying Falsa (a purple coloured fruit) from an old hawker who carried a basket of Falsa on his head. On all such occasions, Shakir had to yield to my demands, without the knowledge of the members of my family. But whenever I had a sore throat, my mother used to say in surprise, "He has never eaten anything from outside."

Hearing this, Shakir and I used to smile in a way that Mother and our family doctor could not see our smiles. Moreover, it was I to whom Shakir could open his heart quite freely.

As our car came closer to the Maulvi's house, I was feeling as if my heart did not know how to beat. It was indeed a strange and wonderful experience. All of a sudden, for the first time in my life, I began to recall all the poems and lyrics which all the poets of the world have ever written in praise of their beloveds. To be more truthful, with a little bit of effort, I myself could also have easily composed a few verses at that time. Perhaps, everyone of us has got a poet hidden somewhere in our personality and this poet only needs some spur or motivation. When this motivation is there, quite unconsciously and spontaneously, poetic words start coming to our mind. These words are soon woven into verses having rhyme and rhythm.

The car entered a street situated in an old quarter of the city. Out into the street, some local children had brought bat and ball and were playing a cricket match without the knowledge of the members of their families. No sooner did the car arrive there, than all of them became attentive towards it. Some of them who seemed to be reserved players, ran along the car for some time. On both sides, there were rows of houses. The car passed from in front of them, then turned to the left and finally stopped in front of a house situated in one corner of the other street. For some unknown reason, my whole blood seemed to have frozen. Just across the wall, that sweetheart of mine must be present, doing something. I thought that the old wooden door that I could see in front of me, must have been touched by her with her soft hands several times. In the same way, on numerous occasions, she must have walked with her delicate feet on the way and into the street that lay ahead. Her melodious voice and her musical laughs must have echoed in this atmosphere many times. I wondered why all of a sudden, this small neighbourhood and this paved street had become the most beautiful place on earth for me. How is it possible for an unknown person to fill a dull and dreary atmosphere with delightful colours with his presence?

While I was still absorbed in such thoughts, Sunny and Shakir had got down from the car and gone inside the Maulvi's house. They had requested me to come along them but it appeared as if I had become motionless in the car. My condition was similar to that of a beggar who stands before a door for centuries in the hope of getting something, but the door never opens for him. Suddenly, the wooden door opened and out came the Maulvi in a worried and confused condition. He was followed by Shakir who too looked perturbed. I myself was somewhat bewildered. As soon as the Maulvi saw me he started saying in an intensely apologetic tone that he had been extremely ashamed of himself. "This Shakir is to blame for the whole trouble," he remarked. If he had informed me of your presence in the car, as soon as he came into my house, I would never have put you in so much trouble of sitting inside the car for such a long time."

"Had I really been sitting in the car for a long time?" I asked myself, because, I had a feeling that I had arrived there only a few moments ago.

At last, I had to succumb to the insistence of the Maulvi, who took me inside his house. It was a small but extremely neat and clean house, whose courtyard had been built with unpaved bricks. In the centre of the courtyard, a large banyan tree stood with its extended branches along which a cradle was hanging. A sort of paved platform had been built around the tree. Along the walls, there were small flower beds in which flowers had been elegantly arranged. In front of the courtyard, there was a veranda covered with wooden grills. Perhaps, behind the veranda there were the living rooms for

the inmates of the house and the women's portion of the house. At the end of the veranda, a door opened into the partition of the wooden grill. The Maulvi took me towards this side. Perhaps, it was the guest room or drawing room of this small house. The part of the veranda having drawing room had been separated by means of grill like partition. I was spellbound and with a bowed head, was silently walking behind the Maulvi. From inside the house, I could hear the loud talking and laughing of Sunny. Occasionally, it was accompanied by melodious feminine voices and I was almost breathless. The small parlour or drawing room of the small house bore an ample testimony to the refined taste and elegance of this family. It had only a few pieces of old furniture which had beautifully embroidered covers. The collection of Ghalib's poetry, a few books written by some well-known writers and some editions of the magazine "Nuqoosh" were placed on the cornice in an orderly manner. It was evident that this family had a special taste for Urdu Literature. My mind was again flooded with fanciful thoughts. She must have turned over the pages of these books several times with her conical fingers. Daily, she must have been visiting this room many times and perhaps, spending many hours sitting here and going through these books. The Maulvi was still apologetic in his tone.

"Sir, you have been rather unjust with us. You came to our humble house for the first time and stood outside the door for so long. This house is not worthy of you but"

"Please don't talk like that," I interrupted him and added, "I had only thought"

Before I could say something else, Shakir completed the sentence. "Hammad had thought of giving you the things and returning from your door, without going inside."

"You'd better stop talking to us," said the Maulvi, looking somewhat angrily towards Shakir. "How is it possible that Mr. Hammad should come to us for the first time and we tell him to return from our door? What type of tradition is it?"

The Maulvi was showing as much hospitality, courtesy and generosity as he could. I wonder why such old courteous manners are vanishing so rapidly from the large mansions and villas of rich people like us.

We tried our best to stop him, but he went inside and whispered something to the rest of the members of his family. Within no time, we could smell the appetizing odour of various things being cooked in the kitchen. They were accompanied by the clattering of dishes and light jingling of bangles.

I tried to prevent the Maulvi from such formalities. "Please don't stand on ceremony. We've come here without telling anyone at home. Sunny's mama must be worried."

But the Maulvi remained unaffected. "Sir, how can a poor man show hospitality and become ceremonious?"

It was revealed that the Maulvi had only two daughters and no son. However, he had brought up under his supervision the son of his late elder brother. The name of that boy was Abdullah and he had proved himself worthy of his name and real successor of Maulvi Alimuddin. The impacts of his training were clearly visible on Abdullah's personality. He used to say the "Takbeer" in the mosque where Maulvi Alimuddin was acting as the Imam (Prayer leader). Now, due to the frequent illness of the Maulvi, Abdullah had started giving the "Azan" (Call to prayer). But at that time, he was not seen anywhere in the house. After some time, there was a slight noise at the door. It appeared as if someone had come there and wanted to say something to the Maulvi. The Maulvi immediately went inside. The jingling of bangles along with some low whispers was heard from inside. One after the other, the Maulvi brought from inside three or four dishes, and all our protests remained unheeded. Within a few minutes they had prepared all the food items which are considered essential for the evening tea. They included home made cheese cake, Samosas along with tamarind sauce, cream with saffron coating, a sweet dish made of carrots, a sweetmeat made of walnuts and a number of other items.

Right from my childhood, I had been facing a strange problem. I always felt extremely shy while eating something in the presence of someone else. It became almost impossible for me to take even a

single bite if a stranger was sitting with me. For some unknown reason, since my childhood, I had a feeling that a person does not look so respectable while eating something in the presence of others. Sitting in the Maulvi's drawing room, I was confronted with the same problem. However, the sincere insistence of the Maulvi had made my innate weakness quite insignificant and I was left with no option but to taste a small quantity of everything placed on the table. The fact is that whoever had prepared these things, had done marvelously well. Never shall I be able to forget their rare and unique taste. Obviously, all these things had been prepared at home, because, it was not possible to bring all these things from the market and arrange them in such a short time. But who could have done this wonderful cooking? There were three women at the Maulvi's house: his wife and two daughters. Her magical hands must also have contributed to the preparation of all these things. With this idea in mind, I picked up everything and tasted it. Then, Shakir said something and I felt that he had given words to my thoughts. "How's your wife now, has her back pain decreased to some extent?"

"No Shakir, there is no improvement in her condition," replied the Maulvi with a worried look and continued, "Old age itself is the worst disease. To make the matters worse new and previously unknown diseases are appearing now. Now, she takes rest most of the time and my daughters have to do all the household work."

It means that I was correct in my assessment. Everything had been prepared by my sweetheart, with her delicate hands and her excellent supervision.

After taking tea, Shakir begged permission to leave. He was thinking that as usual, I must have been bored by this hospitality. It was surprising for him as to how I had remained there for such a long time, without saying anything. I on the other hand had the impression that I had arrived there only a few moments ago. I had not yet openly breathed in the atmosphere of this house. Why was Shakir in such a hurry? If only he could have stayed there for some more time. However, the shot had now been fired and Shakir had stood up to leave. I also had to do the same. The Maulvi was highly grateful to us for our visit to his home. Some tears appeared in his eyes while expressing his gratitude to us again and again. I placed my hand on his shoulder to comfort him and assured him that he was extremely honourable and respectable for all of us.

We all came out of the room into the courtyard. It seemed as if someone were holding my heart into his fist and pressing it. I was going back, without knowing whether I shall ever be able to come here again or not. If only I could see a glimpse of hers, if only, if only.

All of a sudden, while walking in the courtyard, Shakir called Sunny, who was still in the women's portion of the house. Quite unconsciously, the Maulvi and I began looking in that direction from which we could hear the loud laughs of Sunny. For a while, we all stopped in the courtyard and then suddenly, Sunny came running out of the veranda. For a few moments, across the wooden grill, a curtain placed on the door was removed and I felt as if I had achieved the goal of my life. It was she who, from behind the door was waving good-bye to Sunny with a smile on her face. Beside her stood her younger sister Haya who was clinging to her elder sister and also waving her hand to say good-bye to Sunny. Strange indeed is the relationship existing between two sisters having only a small difference of age. It seems that only their bodies are different, otherwise, their minds and hearts are the same. Their thoughts, talks and dresses are alike. I have seen even such two sisters who had been in love with the same boy at the same time.

This splendid view of my beloved lasted only for a few seconds and as soon as she realized that we were all waiting for Sunny in the courtyard, she immediately turned back. But at that blessed moment, Nature was most generous to me and while going back, her eyes came into direct contact with my eager and restless eyes. A few sparks arose and completely consumed my already shattered body. Her one single glance conveyed several meanings: unfamiliarity, fear, modesty and the frustration of her indifference, etc.

Poets and writers of the world have always described different types of relations but I alone knew the intensity with which I could describe the meanings of the eye to eye contact at that moment. The

whole pain, restlessness and helplessness of the world seemed to have been imprisoned in that single moment during which my eyes had a contact with hers.

We came out of her house but I still had the feeling that I had left my soul behind that curtain. Throughout the way, Sunny went on telling us various stories but in reply, I could utter only a few incoherent words. When we arrived back home, we did not tell anyone about our visit to the Maulvi's house and life began to pass as usual once again. But as far as I was concerned, that visit completely changed the course of my life.

For hours, I used to sit at the same place without saying anything to anyone and without having the least notion of the passing of long periods of time. I no longer had any interest in attending the gatherings of my friends. Everything seemed quite meaningless to me. This obvious change in my behaviour had been noticed by all the members of my family. On all such occasions, my mother always resorted to allopathic treatment, followed by homeopathic and then spiritual treatment. As usual, Father heaved a long sigh, advised me to go somewhere else for some time for the change of climate, and then became busy smoking his pipe. Abrina advised my mother to arrange my marriage with her younger sister in order to remove my loneliness. She had given the same advice several times in the past. Since childhood, I had been suffering from a strange and rather enigmatic problem. I used to become seriously ill on the first Thursday of every month. I was examined by all the eminent doctors of the time but no one could understand the exact nature of my mysterious disease. At last, my auntie who was my mother's younger sister, and who lived in another city, advised her to take me to a practitioner of spiritual treatment. How could such backward and conservative ideas be accommodated in the ultra modern family of ours? Father was infuriated by the suggestion and my mother had to hear a long lecture from him. But then, Auntie herself came to our home and without the knowledge of Father, took me and Mother to some saintly person, who examined me and told Mother that I was spiritually very weak and, therefore, throughout my life I would be in danger of facing the harmful effects of the evil eye. He recited something, blew on me and gave me a black thread to wear around my neck. He strongly advised my mother that from then onwards, she herself or someone on her behalf, must give something in charity on the first Thursday of every month. He himself did not accept any offering from us. For a month or two, mother remembered the saint's advice but then, due to her social activities, she assigned to Shakir the duty of distributing something as charity on the first Thursday of every month. Since then, Shakir had been faithfully performing this duty, although, perhaps, Mother had forgotten that disease of my childhood. However, my condition after returning from the Maulvi's house once again reminded her of my old disease. She contacted her younger sister who at once, suggested three or four to the point remedies. But no one could have the least idea of what was actually going on in my heart. It appeared that "Iman" was gradually becoming the focal point of all the joys and ambitions of my life.

CHAPTER 7

THE JEW

An old proverb suggests that true friendship always demands remaining awake throughout the night. The same thing happened with me, and my second night in London was also spent in a sleepless condition. The next morning, Kamran was free because of some strike and, therefore, he dropped me at the University gate. I came to know from the notice board that the head of the department Mr. Isaac was scheduled to address the new students in Hall 3 that day. Thus, all the fresh students were going towards Hall 3.

While we were children, we were very fond of watching a popular historical TV drama serial “Aakhri Chatan” (The Last Rock). It had a Jewish character named David and since my childhood, I had the image of the same Jew in my mind and believed that all the Jews of the world were of the same type. Thus, whenever someone talked about a Jew, the image of David at once came back to my mind and before my eyes. Eversince I had come to know that our head of the department was a Jew, whenever I talked about him, I at once visualized a Jew having a typical appearance. I could imagine a thin and lean man, with a typical Jewish beard on his face, a small white cap on his head, clad in a long cloak, , moving his eyes very rapidly, talking in a careful and calculated manner and having a rosary in his hand.

But the sight of Sir Isaac slightly jolted my firmly rooted views about Jews. He was a robust man with a bearish appearance, more than fifty years of age, clad in a fine precious dress, wearing thin spectacles and talking in a very soft tone. As soon as I saw and heard him, the childhood image of David the Jew no longer remained in my mind and it was replaced by a new image. But there was one resemblance between the two. Sir Isaac too had a small rosary in his hand. Perhaps, according to his habit, he sometimes rolled it in his hands or put it into his pocket.

This new class of Economics consisted of 35 students in which the number of girls was more than that of boys. At last sir Isaac started his highly impressive introductory lecture. First of all, he gave his own introduction and then briefly mentioned some important principles of Economics. Afterwards, he talked about the discipline of the University, and finally, invited us to introduce ourselves. I had been allotted roll # 17 and on the very first day, I came to know that I was the only Muslim student in the class. When it was my turn of introduction, I stood up, told my name and religion. The moment I told that my religion was Islam, I felt that a strange sort of silence prevailed in the whole class for a few moments. Perhaps, it was only a whimsical idea on my part, because, the very next moment, Sir Isaac asked about my previous academic career and degrees and invited the next student to give his introduction. When the introduction of all the students was over, Sir Isaac ended his preliminary lecture with these concluding remarks: “My dear students, from the beginning of the world till the present moment and perhaps, till the end of the time, the world’s finest ideas have always been bitterly opposed by the people having average minds. Remember, he who has never made a mistake, must never have attempted to do something new. I, therefore, advise you never to be hesitant in formulating and presenting new ideas. We must rise above the fear of mistake and opposition from average minds. I once again, welcome you all to this institution. From tomorrow, we shall start our regular classes. Good day.”

Sir Isaac came down from the stage and all the students banged their desks to welcome the views expressed by him in his first lecture. The fact is that I was also considerably impressed by his views and a smile appeared on my lips when I remembered Kamran who had cautioned me to beware of Mr. Isaac. Kamran had promised to pick me up at noon but there were still two hours left before his coming. As I came out of the hall, I looked around to see where to go. Then, I saw a number of benches placed at some distance from one another on the bank of a canal that passed from the centre of the University. This canal was a branch of River Thames. At the same place, I could also see flocks of birds. Time and again, they came there flying, picked up the grains of food that had been thrown for them by the staff members and students sitting on the banks of the canal; and then flew away. I decided to spend those two hours in the same isolated corner of the University. I went there

and sat on one of the wooden benches and became busy watching the playful activities of the birds and the water in front of me.

After some time, I saw an old man coming towards that side. He had a hat on his head and was wearing a long overcoat and a muffler and was carrying a big paper bag full of grains to be thrown for the birds to eat. As soon as he arrived there, he started throwing the grains of food towards the birds and within no time, his paper bag was empty. Having thrown the empty bag into the nearby dustbin, he turned around to go. But then, he saw me and came to me. With his hand held out he said, "I'm Joseph. Are you one of the new students?"

I caught his held out hand and replied, "I'm Hammad, a new student in the first semester at the Economics Department."

He shook hands with me with a smile and remarked, "O I see. But Youngman, why are you sitting here alone? Are you afraid of the ragging of the senior students?"

"No," I said with a smile and added, "I'm only afraid of myself. But at this time, I just wanted to talk to myself and this desire brought me here."

With some interest, Joseph looked towards me and said, "Well gentleman, you want to talk to yourself? I've never thought of such meetings, the meeting of a person with himself."

I moved a bit and vacated some place for him to sit on the wooden bench. As Joseph sat down beside me on the bench, I began to speak, "Such meetings never require any particular attention. In his whole life, a person never talks to anyone else, as much as he talks to himself. He bears himself more than others. Perhaps, no one else has the power and capacity to do so. Man is his own best friend and worst enemy. All the external friendships and hostilities are temporary and short lived."

Joseph was keenly observing me. "You seem to be very much annoyed with yourself; but there must be some genuine reason behind it. It appears as if some furnace is burning inside you."

I decided to change the topic of the discussion. "Besides your name, you haven't told me anything about yourself as your introduction."

"I've already told you my name," said Joseph, after taking a long breath and continued, "I'm Associate Professor at the Fine Arts Department of the same University."

I immediately apologized to him and said, "I'm sorry sir. Perhaps, I've talked to much. But your style doesn't seem to be that of a teacher. Otherwise, I would never have talked so frankly."

"No need for any apology," he said with a big laugh. In fact, I myself intentionally avoid from giving my full introduction to the youngsters, otherwise, they become careful and respectful and I lose the opportunity of mixing with them. I wish that we should always meet and talk to each other with the same frankness and familiarity. You are a different young man and meeting you has really been a unique experience for me."

Joseph stood up to leave and shook hands with me. "Hammad, I believe that we'll soon have another meeting which would lead to several other meetings."

After a warm hand shake with me, Joseph went away. In the meantime, it was time for Kamran to come. I also bade farewell to the transparent water and the cluster of birds and went to the outside gate, passing through the long corridors of the University. Kamran's car was already there. I looked around in search of him. At last, I found him standing near a pop corn machine, observing the hands of two English girls, like a palmist. He was assuring them that very soon, a handsome Asian young man would come into their life; and his advent would bring about revolutionary changes in their life. I had always been envious of this quality of Kamran. Not to speak of an unknown girl, I was always reluctant to talk even to an unknown boy in the first meeting, till at last, that stranger himself would take the initiative in talking. In contrast, Kamran was capable of stopping and talking to anyone, anywhere and at any time for hours. Perhaps, I had always been afraid of being rejected, while Kamran had never known any such fear. On seeing me, Kamran at once waved his hand to me, gave his card to the English girls, got their phone numbers and walked towards me with a smile.

As we got into the car, I glared at him and said, "You will never mend your ways."

Kamran laughed and remarked, "My dear, "standing outside the University for the last fifteen minutes, I began to feel boredom and thought of killing the time by having a look at the hands of these girls."

"Kamran, as far as my knowledge is concerned, I've never heard of any palmist in the last seven generations of your family."

Kamran still had the same mischievous smile on his face. "Let it go my dear. Tell me what's your programme for the lunch? I'm feeling terribly hungry."

I loosened my seat belt a little bit. "I'm also feeling hungry. Take me wherever you like."

Kamran accelerated the speed of his car. "Let's go to Piccadilly. I've heard a lot of praise of a newly opened restaurant there."

Travelling on the wide transparent two way and four way roads of London, our car turned to the right from in front of the Big Bang. Then, we drove past London's famous bridge of towers and turned towards Piccadilly. I have always liked these wide roads of London. I have read somewhere that at the end of the 18th century and at the start of the 19th century, in an attempt to deal with the frequent popular uprisings and riotings, European officials widened all these roads, so that the government and armed forces could easily keep the violent mobs under control at one place.

As we turned to the left from the Piccadilly Circus, we saw a silent and desolate road covered with rows of trees on both sides. In a wide roadside drain, the water of melting snow was flowing in a rhythmic manner. As soon as Kamran and I turned towards this road, we at once became silent, as if the immense beauty of Nature had deprived us of our speaking power. As the wind blew, the leaves on the wet road were waving and fluttering and it appeared as if a Pathan cloth seller from Kabul, had been sitting there with a sheet of silk spread in front of him, bringing out new and colourful rolls of cloth and waving them in the air.

At times it seems as if we pass our whole life again within a few moments. Our journey on the road bordered by trees and covered with yellow autumnal leaves was also one of these few moments. For a while, we completely forgot that we had come here to have our lunch at a newly opened restaurant at the end of this road.

At last, like every good thing in the world, this road also came to an end. We had the lunch of our choice at the small beautiful wooden restaurant. When Kamran asked me about the University, I told him about Sir Isaac's lecture and about the silence of the whole class during my introduction when I revealed that I was a Muslim. On such occasions, Kamran always behaved like an illiterate villager and had no control over his anger. He banged the glass on the table. "These damned Whites! They are all---."

With a great deal of difficulty, I brought him under control but he was still in a very bad mood. In order to change his mood, I told him a joke. "A White woman was once attacked by a biting dog. A passerby risked his own life but saved the woman from the dog. The next day's newspapers carried pictures of the man saving the White woman from the dog, with the headline "An English hero saves a woman from a dog." The man telephoned the newspaper office and reported that he was not English. Another headline appeared in the next day's newspaper. "A foreign hero saves a woman from a dog" The man again telephoned the newspaper office and revealed that he was a Pakistani Muslim and not a foreigner. A different headline appeared in the next day's newspaper under the same picture. "A dangerous terrorist attacks a pet dog."

For a moment, Kamran looked towards me in astonishment and then, both of us laughed spontaneously. The small restaurant was echoing with our laughters and the people sitting all around were looking towards us with surprise.

CHAPTER 8

WOUNDED IN LOVE

During my childhood, whenever I received some injury while playing, I never wept before anyone. Even in case of the severest pain, I always attempted to hold back my tears in the presence of others. In all such situations, I would at once rush towards some lonely and isolated corner of the house, where I wept to the full satisfaction of my heart. In fact, since childhood, I had never liked to weep before others, because I had a notion that by weeping in the presence of others, we lose our honour and esteem in their eyes.

After returning from the Maulvi's house, I found myself in a somewhat similar situation. I wished to weep but could not find a suitable place for it. It was a strange sort of helplessness.

After his recovery, the Maulvi again started coming to our home for teaching Sunny. In those days, whenever he came, somehow or the other, I continued to hover around him, in the hope that Sunny might say something to him about Iman, or the Maulvi himself might tell something about his family including Iman. But all such hopes ended up in smoke. Then, my infatuation assumed another form. I used to wait for the Maulvi's arrival. As soon as he entered our house, I would take out my car and park it in front of his locality's gate, and at times, quite near his street. Having parked my car there, I used to remain inside the car, waiting for the Maulvi's return, hoping that one day or the other, she might come out to open the door for her father. But such things never happened. I had never seen any member of the Maulvi's family coming out of the house, although almost all the people living in the nearby houses had become quite familiar with my car. However, none of them ever objected to my frequent visits to that place. They had often seen Shakir coming to the Maulvi's house in such big cars and they might have got a similar impression about me. The positive aspect of their attitude was that none of them ever talked to the Maulvi about me, otherwise, it would have been quite difficult for me to give a satisfactory explanation of my behaviour to him. With every passing day, my crazy love was increasing. At last, it appeared as if Nature had decided to show some mercy to me. It was a hot summer afternoon and as usual, the Maulvi was giving his lesson to Sunny. I too was sitting in the same room, without any reason, reading the same page of a magazine for a long time. Shakir also arrived there with a happy news for the Maulvi. "My daughter is going to be engaged on next Friday. You and your family are invited to attend the engagement ceremony due to be held in the afternoon of Friday next."

The Maulvi congratulated Shakir on his daughter's engagement and expressed his immense joy at the news. But he apologized to Shakir and told him that he would not be able to attend the ceremony, because, he had already promised to go on a preaching mission with a preaching party on the coming Friday and he could not break that promise. He, however, promised with Shakir to send the rest of the members of his family with his nephew Abdullah to the engagement ceremony. The moment I heard these words, I felt as if I had suddenly seen an oasis after wandering for years in a trackless, waterless, barren and desolate desert. I knew that Shakir would surely invite all of us to attend the engagement ceremony of his daughter, despite knowing that no member of our aristocratic family would go to share his joy on that occasion. Perhaps, the whole show had been arranged by Nature to show me a glimpse of hers and exactly the same thing happened. When Shakir requested my father to come, he as usual, brought out some big currency notes from his purse and gave them to Shakir. "Buy something for your daughter with this money on my behalf."

Mother told her maid servant to ransack old boxes and cupboards. The old clothes and ornaments which were found as a result of this search were given to Shakir in an old bag. When everyone else disappointed him, Shakir looked towards me and I consoled him.

"I'll surely come. I promise."

Signs of disapproval appeared on Father's face but they were lost behind the smoke of his pipe. Mother and my brother's wife Abrina also showed signs of displeasure, but nobody said anything to me. No doubt, I had my own selfish interest in accepting Shakir's invitation but it is also a fact that I would surely have gone to his house, even if there had been no chance of seeing a glimpse of Iman.

My relationship with Shakir was not that of a servant and master. It had risen above such things and the members of my family had been fully aware of it since my childhood.

A long time ago, Shakir lived in the same neighbourhood in which the Maulvi was now living. At a very young age, he had been employed by my grandfather as his driver. He had also been present at the marriage ceremony of my father. A few years later, when Shakir himself was married, my grandfather allowed him and his wife to stay in the servant quarters at the back of his bungalow. These servant quarters were pretty large houses, which had been built at the back of our old Haveli (large house). During those days, my grandfather's relatives who lived in the village used to visit him quite frequently and for this reason, he had got built three or four quarters in the rear of the Haveli.

After my grandfather's death, my father got built another large mansion in accordance with the modern requirements. However, our old Haveli (large house) was still present in the outskirts of the city. Now, Shakir and his family lived in that Haveli and looked after it. Shakir had two sons and a daughter. Both the sons often remained out of the city in connection with their work. Some special parties and meetings were still held by Father in the same Haveli. In fact, Father was now thinking of turning this Haveli into his camp office. Shakir returned after inviting us to the engagement ceremony of his daughter, but now, I alone knew how difficult it was to pass the time. Minutes, hours and days had never seemed so long to me as they did in those four days. Friday came at last, after a long and weary waiting. I still remember that before the rising of the sun on that day, I had an intense desire to go to the garden adjacent to the gate of the old Haveli and sit there till the afternoon, because, all the guests had to enter the house from the same way. She would also pass from the same way. What a moment it would be, I thought. I wondered whether I would be able to see her or not. The ceremony was to start at four in the evening, while now, it was still very early in the morning. Like a lost traveler I continued to roam about in the corridors of my own house like a stray kite. It was the day when I realized for the first time, how moments pass like hours. At last, when the clock struck two, I took out my car and rushed towards the old Haveli like a child who fasts for the first time in his life and goes to the dining table and sits there long before the scheduled time for the breaking of the fast.

Seeing me there so early, Shakir was pleased and also a bit upset. Till that time, Shakir and his sons were busy in making arrangements. With a great deal of difficulty, I convinced Shakir that he should not worry about me and should continue his work, while I would take a round of the Haveli. As long as I remained in his sight, I walked about here and there in the Haveli, but the moment, his attention was diverted to some other matters, I slipped away from there, went straight to the garden near the gate and sat down on one of the chairs placed there. All the guests had to enter through the same central gate, because, the Haveli did not have any other passage leading to Shakir's quarter. Guests started arriving at about three-thirty and with them, my heart beat also quickened. I became almost breathless whenever I saw a veiled woman coming towards the gate. But there was no sign of her for whom I had been sitting there and waiting as if for centuries. I felt that she might not come. The Maulvi might have forbidden her or there might have been some other problem. Thousands of apprehensions and suspicions were perturbing my heart all the time and adding to my agony and despair. Then, all of a sudden, a tonga producing its typical sound, appeared at the turn of the cold road on which the Haveli was situated. Like the last glow of a flickering lamp, my eyes were fixed on the tonga with a last desperate hope. The tonga halted in front of the large wooden gate of the Haveli. On the front seat beside the tonga driver, there was a young man with a small beard and a bright face, clad in white Shalwar kurta. The young man came down from the tonga and paid the fare to the driver. From the back seat came down two girls wearing black Burkas. Everything stood still and motionless, the wind ceased to blow and all the birds sitting in the trees forgot their songs. It was she. How could I ever forget her delicate steps? She was surely accompanied by her younger sister. Only their eyes were visible from the veil. Oh, the same eyes again! The young man had a look at the grand Haveli in astonishment, because, he could never imagine such a residence belonging to an old driver. Then, he looked towards the two girls as if to seek some confirmation from them. The

younger of the two girls attempted to make him understand something. But still, in a state of confusion, he reluctantly opened the gate and came in. Perhaps, all of them had come to Shakir's house for the first time.

Suddenly, the Young man saw me and then, I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw all of them coming towards me. I stood up in nervousness. There was a glimmer of familiarity in the eyes of the younger sister and she whispered something to Iman. Perhaps, Haya had recognized me. Iman lifted her eyes and looked towards me. There was a flash of lightning. It was for the second time that her eyes had a direct encounter with mine. I was overpowered by a feeling of ecstasy and it appeared to me that all the anguish, agony, pain and restlessness that I had felt between her first and second look, had now become calm and tranquil.

As the young man came near, he greeted me and said, "Sir, is it the house of Shakir, whose daughter is going to be engaged today?"

"Yes, you've come at the right place. The ceremony is taking place in the same house."

As I showed him the way, he thanked me, shook hands with me and moved forward along with the two girls. With a great deal of difficulty, I prevented myself from looking directly towards Iman, although, she was quite close to me. Even then, I continued to relish a strange and subtle sense of joy because of her nearness. The younger one seemed somewhat mischievous and while she was on her way to the venue of the ceremony, she continued to look attentively towards me. It appeared as if life had sprung back into action. Once again, the wind started blowing and the birds started chirping. With a feeling of exhaustion, I almost fell on the chair. There are some blessed moments of our life which we wish to enjoy again and again and it was of course, one of those rare moments of my life. But unfortunately, whenever something is over, whether good or bad, it eventually turns into a memory. I sat there for a long time, trying to assure and reassure myself that whatever had happened was not a dream and that only a short while ago, she had been present there quite in front of me and so close to me.

Soon, from the inside of the house I could hear the sounds of talking, laughing and singing of women and then, Shakir who was in search of me, also came there. "O Mr. Hammad, you are sitting here, while all the people are waiting for you in the ceremony. Please come now."

Shakir forcefully held my hand and took me to the men's portion of the house. As soon as they saw me, all of them at once became somewhat reserved and respectful. Their laughing and talking changed into whispers. For this very reason, I did not want to join this crowd. At times, your own introduction becomes a nuisance for you. All the people attending the engagement ceremony, were recognizing me not as one of Shakir's guests but as the son of Retired Commissioner Amjad Raza. I soon became bored with this gathering. Moreover, my heart was pre-occupied with some other thoughts and had no interest in whatever else was going on around me. After some time, someone from the women's portion of the house called Shakir and it gave me the opportunity to rush out from there. I had particularly urged Shakir that he should arrange some open place in the house where his guests could comfortably sit and eat. For this purpose, I had insisted that the main hall of the Haveli should be used. He was afraid of my father's possible annoyance but as usual, he had to yield to my stubbornness. The main hall was now being used for the male guests. In front of its back door, there was the small garden of Shakir's quarter. Behind it, there was Shakir's house. As I came out of the hall, I saw the same young man who had come with Iman and Haya. Standing at the door, he seemed a bit worried. On seeing me, he at once came to me.

"I'm sorry sir, I couldn't recognize you at that time. My name is Abdullah. I'm the nephew of Maulvi Alimuddin. Uncle often talks about you."

A wave of pleasant joy swept across my whole body. At least, there was someone who talked about me in that house. At times, my darling might also have mentioned my name. At that moment, for the first time in my life, my own name began to look so charming to me and I again shook hands with Abdullah.

“I’m glad to see you. I came to your house a few days ago, but perhaps, you were not there at that time. But why are you standing outside the hall? Go inside, because, tea is going to be served very soon.”

In some confusion he replied, “The fact is that very soon, it will be time for the Maghrib Prayer and you are well aware of my uncle’s mind. We should go back now. I’m standing here waiting for someone to go inside and tell my sisters to come out and go back with me.”

In the meantime, Shakir also came out from the women’s portion and seeing us standing outside, he at once came to us. “Mr. Hammad, are you all right? Why’re you standing here?”

“I’m all right,” I replied with a smile and drew his attention towards Abdullah. “He’s in a hurry to go back and says that he’s getting late.”

Shakir was surprised and then he forcefully shook his head. “You want to leave so soon? How’s it possible? Even the ring wearing ceremony has not yet been held. I won’t allow anyone to go without having the dinner, which would be served soon after the Maghrib Prayer. It’s simply impossible.”

In a humble and submissive tone, Abdullah began to speak. No no, Shakir Uncle, it would be too late after the Maghrib Prayer. It would be quite difficult for me to find a conveyance for my area and you know my uncle very well.”

“As far as the Maulvi is concerned, I myself will deal with him. He knows quite well that it’s a joyous moment for my only daughter and getting late on such occasions is a routine matter. As far as conveyance is concerned, I myself will take you back in the car. It’s decided now.”

When Shakir had given his final judgment, Abdullah could no longer argue with him. He begged leave from Shakir to go to the nearby mosque for offering the Maghrib Prayer. Shakir urged him to return soon and he began walking towards the mosque. Then, it seemed as if Shakir had suddenly remembered something and he struck his hand on his head.

“O Mr. Hammad, you see I’m getting old. I forgot to tell you that Nighat’s mother wants you inside.”

Nighat was Shakir’s daughter and when I was a child, at the end of every academic year, I used to give all my books to her because, Shakir was always worried about his daughter’s education. Sometimes she used to come to our home with his father while she was only a child. I could still remember her as a quiet little child. I always addressed Shakir’s wife as Auntie which greatly irritated my real Aunties. In fact, I had become quite familiar with all the members of Shakir’s family. Without the knowledge of his parents, Sunny often took different things with him to the Maulvi’s house. Same had been the case with me when I was a child. Quite secretly, I used to give my school bags, chocolates, books and other things to Shakir and his family. While returning from school, I used to stop for a while at the Haveli in order to give my small gifts to Shakir’s family. In spite of the fact that such activities of mine were not liked by Shakir’s wife, whom I addressed as Auntie, I did not give up this routine throughout my school life. Later on, when I was sent to a hostel, I always regularly visited this family whenever I returned home during the holidays.

I was sure that Auntie would ask Shakir about me and call me inside. But I was intentionally trying to avoid and evade such occasion. At that time, I did not like to go in because, I knew that all the women must be present there. Even if there had been nobody else, at least, Iman must be there and I feared that in her presence, I might not be able to talk confidently and properly to Auntie and Nighat. Iman must already have noticed my nervousness while she was entering through the gate. However, at that moment, I had no chance or excuse for refusing Shakir. He was standing near me and was determined to take me to the inside room, because, he knew very well that if I was left alone, I would never go in. I had a strange relationship with Shakir and I never felt the need for calling him Uncle or Baba. Whenever I had to call him, I simply called him by his name Shakir and it had been my routine since childhood. I never used some traditional method for expressing the respect which I had for him in my heart. Perhaps, the relationship existing between us, did not require any traditional name or respect.

As I went along Shakir towards the women's portion of the house, I could hear the talking and laughing of women, who were singing delightful marriage songs. There were women all around, in the courtyard, veranda and the inside rooms. On seeing me, all of them became attentive towards me. Some of them laughed while others whispered something to one another. For this reason, I had always been reluctant to go to such feminine gatherings. Whenever there is a large social gathering of women, they become very bold and audacious and when they get together on the occasion of some marriage, they even surpass men.

As soon as Auntie saw me, she came to me and showed her motherly affection and love to me. Her daughter Nighat was sitting in veil with bent head. Hearing about my coming, she lifted her head and signalled me to come near. With some difficulty, Shakir paved the way for me. I gently patted on Nighat's head. "I knew it must have been one of your mischiefs. You should have sat silently at least on your engagement day."

Nighat smiled under her veil. "Brother Hammad, Mother has prohibited me from going to college after my engagement. She says my in-laws don't like it. Please talk to my father about this matter, at least for my sake."

"What a strange thing it is!" I said with a big laugh. I've heard that on the eve of their engagement, girls are overflowing with romantic and fanciful thoughts, about their future bridegroom and his activities. But look at this girl, she is only worried about her studies even on her engagement day."

After some pause, I whispered into her ears, "Nighat, you need not worry at all. To hell with your in-laws. Nobody can stop you from continuing your studies, neither your mother, nor your father and not even the man who is going to be your husband in six months time. I'll myself talk to him. Are you happy now?"

She was happy indeed and tears of happiness could be seen in her eyes. Why do the girls have such a small heart? Even the most trivial things are sufficient to bring tears into their eyes or fill their hearts with pleasure. But their joys as well as sorrows are short lived. And momentary. How is it possible for all these girls to keep the mirror of their hearts so clean?

Suddenly, I saw the little Haya who was present in the same room, where Nighat had been seated. She was talking in a low tone to some other woman, but there was no sign of Iman anywhere in the room. I wanted to rush out of the room but Shakir was not seen anywhere in this whole crowd of women. Since childhood, I had been fully aware of every nook and corner of Shakir's house. I thought of passing through the adjoining room and going out from the back door, because a large number of women were sitting on a rug on the floor of the veranda. The adjoining room was used as a living room by the inmates of the house and, therefore, there was no chance of the presence of outside guests in that room. One of the doors of this other room opened into the backyard, where the dinner was being prepared in big cauldrons.

I signaled to Nighat that I would meet her later. There was a door that joined both the rooms. Through that door, I went into the other room which was filled with the evening twilight and apparently, there was nobody there. I walked towards the door that opened into the backyard. But then, all of a sudden, I saw someone quickly coming out from behind a large wooden cabinet along the wall. This cabinet was mainly used for keeping the crockery and glass dishes of the house. That shadow collided with me and a few glass plates slipped out of its hands and fell down on the floor. A low suppressed feminine scream echoed in the atmosphere. To be honest, I myself had been completely unnerved. After colliding with me, that shadow staggered and stumbled for a while but then immediately regained control over itself. However, in this process of recovery, the head covering slipped down from its place and came to the shoulders. It was Iman. Everyone must have heard about the Day of Judgment but perhaps, no one besides me might have ever had a better idea of the exact nature of that dreadful day. Her beauty had been fully exposed and was so near to me that I could feel the fragrance of her confused breaths on my bosom. In this state of confusion and chaos, a strand of her hair had fallen down on her face and her pink, milky, charming, heavenly face was becoming fiery red with the feelings of fear, modesty and bashfulness.

Have the prayers of somebody ever been rewarded by Nature in such a quick and excellent manner? Perhaps, never.

"Excuse me," she spoke in utter nervousness. "I---I had come here to get some utensils."

In reply, I could not say even a single word. Perhaps, I had permanently been deprived of my ability to speak. Hearing the sound of falling dishes, Shakir's wife and Iman's younger sister hastily rushed there from the other room. They seemed to have understood the whole situation as soon as they saw Iman and me standing there along with broken pieces of glass dishes scattered on the floor. As Iman hurriedly advanced towards Auntie she laughed and said, "Were you afraid of Him? He's our own child Hammad. You may consider him to be Nighat's third brother."

Haya put a corner of her head scarf into her mouth to control her laughter. By that time, Iman had also recovered from the shock. She placed her hand on her forehead as if to greet me. In a laughing mood, Auntie told her to go and assured her, "Haya and I will pick up the broken bits of glass. Nighat is alone there, go to her." Auntie once again urged me not to go home without having dinner. I don't remember how and when I came out of the room. What an eventful evening it had been! Had Nature decided to reward me in a single day, for the few good deeds that I had done in the short span of my life? How close she had been to me! She was closer to me than my jugular vein. The fact is that throughout my life, I had never felt so much love for God as I felt on that day. How ungrateful we the human beings are. We spend the whole day expressing our deep love for the things around us, for our dear and near ones and for the various blessings bestowed upon us by God but we hardly ever show our love for that God who gives us all such wonderful gifts in one way or the other.

On that day, I was full of the feelings of love and gratitude for God who had rewarded me much more than my expectations. Like an intoxicated person, oblivious of his surroundings, I remained seated in some isolated corner of the house, quite indifferent to what had been going on around me. The dinner had been served and Shakir brought something to eat for me, at the same place where I was sitting. After some time, the ceremony was over and one after the other, the guests began to leave.

I was roused from my reverie when I saw the last group of women going away in their shawls and Burkas. I was rather irritated at my prolonged state of forgetfulness, because, by now, she must have gone. I went towards the gate and heaved a sigh of relief on seeing Shakir standing there with Abdullah. With hurried steps, I went near them. On seeing me, Shakir said, "Mr. Hammad has come, and now, the problem will be solved."

The car that had been taken on rent for taking back the guests, was being driven by Shakir's elder son but he had not yet returned and signs of worry were clearly visible on Abdullah's face. I suggested to Shakir that if Abdullah thought it appropriate, I would drop him and the girls at the Maulvi's house, on my way back home.

"This is exactly what I'm saying to Abdullah, but he's standing on ceremony."

"There's no need for any such thing," I said. "I'm also leaving for my home and I'll drop you people at your house on my way."

Abdullah was left with no alternative but to accept my proposal, because, it was already getting dark and it was not possible to find any other conveyance for going to that part of the city. By the time I reached the Haveli's central gate in my car, Shakir had brought both the girls from inside. Shall I be able to see so many miracles in a single day? I had never thought about it. After bidding farewell to Shakir, Abdullah and the girls got into the car. Abdullah was seated with me on the front seat, while Haya and Iman were sitting on the back seat. As I started the car, I wondered if the whole scene was a dream. I tried to assure myself that it was not a dream. But the very next moment, I thought that it must have been a dream, as she was present in my car, sitting on the back seat. In the backview mirror, my eyes continued to circumambulate her. Both she and her sister were in full veil and only her eyes were visible. But the very idea of her being so near, was a source of rapturous joy for me. I was driving the car as if in a dream world. Abdullah was a reticent sort of person and I too was lost in my own dreams, and we remained silent throughout the way. For the first time in my life,

during that journey, I was angry at the absence of the rush of traffic on the roads; and the whole distance was being covered very rapidly. Both the girls were also sitting silently on the back seat. Iman was continuously watching the scenes outside the window, and she did not try to look forward even for a single time, intentionally or unintentionally. For my part, quite secretly, I was continuously watching her in the mirror. This unknown girl had cast a strange spell on me as I was gradually losing all control over myself.

Within no time, we reached the locality in which lived Maulvi Alimuddin and his family. The area looked quiet and uninhabited because of the night time. As I parked the car in the Maulvi's street, Abdullah earnestly expressed gratitude to me and formally asked me to come in. But I thanked him and said, "It's already very late at night. I'll come some other day."

Iman and Haya had also got down from the car. Iman remained silent while Haya said "thank you" while getting down. In reply, I could do nothing except nodding my head. I shook hands with Abdullah, turned back the car and moved forward. While going out of the street, I saw in the backview mirror. The door of the house had opened and they had gone inside. Then, somehow or the other, I arrived back home and with a great deal of effort, managed to go to bed. But I still clearly remember that I could not sleep even for a single moment throughout that night. During that night, I realized that the serpent of love had bitten me and its poison was slowly piercing into the whole of my body.

CHAPTER 9

THE FIRST PERIOD

At about seven in the morning, I was suddenly awakened by the sharp bells of the alarm clock. For a moment, I could not understand the exact nature of the noise. When I looked out of the window, I found that the skies of London were once again covered with white clouds that morning and perhaps, light drizzling was also going on. Then, I remembered that my regular classes were to start from that day and in order to attend the first period at nine, I must reach the subway by eight o' clock. The reason was that if I missed the 8-10 train, I would surely miss the first period which was to start at nine.

Human nature is very strange indeed. If a certain restriction is imposed on man, gradually, he starts considering it to be a burden for himself. In ordinary conditions, even if I had got up after a whole sleepless night, I would not have disliked it so much as I disliked going to the University so early that morning. Kamran had already gone. With an unwilling heart, I had a shower of lukewarm water, gulped down a hot mug of coffee, changed my dress and went downstairs.

You may go to any city, but everywhere you will feel that its mornings are quite different from and at times, much more pleasant than the rest of the day, because, it is the time when all the people wake up from their sleep and go about their daily business. Same was the case with London that morning. The female Spanish guitarist had just got down from the tram, carrying her usual guitar case. The freshness on her face and the slight drowsiness in her eyes had made her much more charming and attractive than before. By that time, we had become quite familiar with each other and she smiled as soon as she saw me. I brought out a few coins from my pocket but with a smile, she refused to take them. As I looked towards her in astonishment, she explained to me in her incoherent English that she got money from the people only after entertaining them with the tunes of her guitar. As she had not yet played any tune, she would not accept any money from me. I was much impressed by what she had said and made another attempt to give her the money. "The fact is that these are not today's coins. A couple of days ago, I stood at a distance and listened to your tunes for a long time. But then, I didn't have coins in my pocket to pay you. Take these coins now for that day."

Hearing this, she smiled and got the coins from my hand. For the first time that morning, she told me that her name was Jenny and asked about my name. It was not so easy for her to repeat my name, which she pronounced as "Aamad."

I laughed at her pronunciation. Then I told her the shortened form of my name "Medi" which she happily repeated as "Signor Medi."

I laughed and resumed my journey. By the time I reached the University, the light drizzling had assumed the form of rain. All the students were present in the class. Sir Isaac was to take the first period and as soon as he entered the class, all the students became silent. The only sound that could be heard at that time was that of the rain falling on the high glass windows and at times, this sound became almost musical. During the first period, sir Isaac talked about some important aspects of Economics. But I could understand only half of the lecture, because, for along time, I had been away from the books. Moreover, I was not fully attentive towards the lecture. While going through the time table sheet, I realized that one subject was completely new for me. It was called Humaneering. Its first lecture was to be delivered at 11-30 in Hall 7.

I was surprised when sir Isaac clad in his black gown once again entered the class. It was revealed that this particular subject had been included in the course at sir Isaac's own request. The word Humaneering is made up of two words: human engineering. You may regard it as a study of the build up of human psychology.

Sir Isaac was of the view that after receiving education from his university, the students should not only be able to make an excellent start in their own fields, but should also be mentally and psychologically strong enough to enforce their decisions in their respective departments. For this reason, he had decided that he himself would teach this particular subject during the course. The

topic of the first lecture was “Too much wisdom is the other name of stupidity.” Sir Isaac was of the view that while we are loving some people most intensely, we are unconsciously nourishing in ourselves a sort of irritation for them. But as long as we are in love with them, our feeling of helplessness and our fear of losing them, prevent us from expressing these opposite feelings in front of them. Sometimes, it so happens that our inward irritation intensifies and takes the form of strong hatred for them. As a result, whenever such relations of intense love break up, they are transformed into severe hatred. This hatred does not spring up all of a sudden. It is the essence of the negative feelings which we have been nourishing for a very long time.

During that lecture, I realized that besides being an excellent economist, sir Isaac was also a good philosopher and intellectual.

When the lecture was over, he invited the students to express their views on the topic. When it was my turn to speak I said, “The feelings may be of intense love or hatred. But in both the cases, they shatter the man. I personally believe that love is a more dangerous emotion than hatred and---.)

Before I could complete my sentence, a golden haired girl sitting in front of me, turned and looked towards me in an angry and disdainful manner. “Some people are naturally inclined towards disagreeing with everything,” she said and continued, “The elements of stubbornness and conceited non-compromise are deeply rooted in their training.”

I did not know that girl by name, but her roll-# was 22. From my very first day at the University, I had noticed that this girl along with four or five members of her group had been constantly satirizing and making fun of my religion and nationality, in one way or the other. Generally, I ignored their taunting remarks because, I did not wish to get involved in such irrelevant and useless things. But on that particular occasion, I lost control over myself and hit back. “I find this type of inferiority complex in those people who are apparently very proud of their training but in reality, somehow or the other, their inward ignorance is exposed.”

As soon as roll-# 22 heard these words, her face became red with rage. She turned around to answer me. But before she could speak, sir Isaac drew our attention towards himself by loudly beating the duster on the rostrum.

“Please, please! Don’t quarrel like that. Everyone has the right to disagree, but it should remain within the limits of morality. Miss Sarah Perez, meet me in my office after the lecture.”

In the meantime, the bell rang and the lecture was over, but by that time, I had come to know that the name of that belligerent girl was Sarah Perez. Who apparently belonged to a well off and reasonable family. Looking towards me with blood thirsty eyes, she went out of the classroom along with the rest of the members of her gang. I too went out carrying my bag and found that the rain had stopped but the intensity of cold had increased. I rubbed my hands and put them into the pockets of my jacket. Before I could go ahead, I was told by the attendant that sir Isaac wanted to see me in his office.

Hearing this, I stepped into that corridor at the end of which, there was sir Isaac’s office. After giving a gentle knock at the outer door, I opened it and saw Sarah sitting in an infuriated mood on one of the chairs across the table opposite to sir Isaac. In the short span of time, I heard only a few words spoken by her. “I’m at a loss to understand as to why you granted admission to a Muslim in your university without any particular reason. Don’t you know that---.”

Before she could complete her sentence, I had entered the room and as she saw me she said, “Come on Hammad.”

Sarah became silent and I sat down on a chair in front of her. After noting something in the file that lay before him, sir Isaac closed it and looked towards both of us.

“I wanted to introduce you to each other. It might be helpful in understanding the matters. Sarah, meet him. He’s Hammad Amjad Raza. His grandfather held a very high post in the personal staff of the British Viceroy in united India. He has fulfilled all the strict terms and conditions for getting admission in our university. He has always been an excellent student.”

Sarah heard all these words in an arrogant and indifferent manner. Then, sir Isaac pointed towards Sarah. “Mr. Hammad, meet her. She is Sarah Isaac Perez, who has been a position holder for the last four semesters. She is my daughter and I hope you did not mind her bitter words so much.”

So this monstrous girl was sir Isaac’s daughter, a Jewess. That is why, she always talked to me in a venomous tone. Even at that time, she was sitting in a proud and spiteful manner, with her face towards the other side, to give the impression that she regarded the person sitting on the chair next to her, not as a human being but a contemptible worm. Then, sir Isaac delivered a short lecture about the classroom manners and university discipline and expressed the hope that in the times to come, the atmosphere of the classroom would not become tense because of us. Both of us listened to him silently and then we were allowed to go. Almost at the same time, we left the office and began walking in opposite directions without looking at each other. On that very day, I had realized that it would not be so easy for me to get the Economics degree from this university. The cold war that had just started between me and Sarah, might soon turn into a major confrontation.

CHAPTER 10

THE VENOM OF LOVE

After dropping Iman at her house that night, I started feeling her presence with me, at every moment of the night and day. I had heard a large number of romantic and amorous tales but till then, I had never known that the stinging of love could be so venomous. Within a single moment, the venom of love had pierced into each and every limb, bone, tissue and muscle of my body and I felt as if I had been destined to suffer all the time.

Love takes possession of a man like a painful torment which continues to bite and sting him if it happens to be a one sided affair. He lives and dies again and again, in the course of a single moment

I was utterly unable to find some ways and means of conveying to Iman the strong and intense feelings of love which I had for her. It was impossible for her to come out of her home. I had already spent hours and hours standing outside her home, for several days, in the hope of seeing a glimpse of hers. Moreover, now, Abdullah had also become quite familiar to me and there was always the danger of meeting him while standing outside his home. Besides this, even if she ever came out of her home, I did not like to stop her on the way and talk to her. It might leave a negative impression on her about me. But then, how to gain access to her? It was the only question which pestered my mind all the time.

It is an all-admitted fact that there can be no limit to the human desires and wishes. Whenever man achieves a goal, he begins to regard it as a milestone and he starts his journey for achieving some other goal. In this process, his whole life is spent. Perhaps, man is destined to remain in this state of constant and unending struggle. Till a short time ago, having a single glimpse of Iman was the sole objective of my life. Nature had fulfilled this desire of mine on a number of occasions. But now, my desires and prayers had gone far beyond having another glimpse of hers. Somehow or the other, I wished to convey to her my intense emotions and feelings. Sometimes I think that the main cause of our ungratefulness to God is the fulfillment of our desires and achievement of our goals. If we had not fulfilled any of our desires, we would never have run after new ones. How fine it would have been, if we had spent our whole life struggling to fulfil a single desire.

It would have been much better for me if I had not been able to see Iman after the party. In that case, I would not have been obsessed with this madness, and throughout my life, I would have wandered restlessly to see another glimpse of hers.

My days and nights were being spent in the same anguish and agony. One evening, I was sitting on the roof, watching the setting sun of the passing summer. The summer sun takes a lot of time to set. It appears as if it is fighting a war with the night and is not willing to give its friend the evening twilight, to the dark shadows of the night. While as usual, I was sitting on the roof that evening, Shakir came there.

“O Mr. Hammad, you are here? I’ve been searching for you everywhere. Here is a letter for you from my daughter Nighat.”

After giving me the letter, Shakir stood up to go. But then remembered something and stopped for a moment. “She was saying, request brother Hammad to fulfil his promise as soon as possible.”

While giving his daughter’s message, Shakir laughed and then went away. When I opened the letter, I found only a few lines written on the paper. “My dear brother, you seem to have forgotten your promise. You haven’t yet talked to my father about my studies. Exams are close at hand and if I don’t submit my forms in time, I’ll lose a precious year of my academic career. Waiting for your recommendation.”

I then remembered that on the eve of her engagement, I had promised to talk to her father about the continuation of her studies. But how could she know that I was no longer in a position to remember the promises that I had made to others? I was passing through a condition in which at times, I did not remain conscious of even myself. However, I immediately decided to talk to Shakir about this problem. I knew very well that Shakir would never disappoint me. Even if it required us to go to Nighat’s fiancé, I was mentally prepared for it.

With Nighat's written message in my hand, I was sitting in an absent minded manner, watching the setting sun. Then, all of a sudden, a brilliant idea flashed across my mind, like a blaze of lightning. What about Nighat? Yes Nighat! She could become an intermediary source between me and Iman, after all, she was a close intimate friend of Iman and Haya. I wondered why I didn't think of Nighat during all those days while I was banging my head against the walls in frustration and despair. Now, this brainwave give a new dimension to my restlessness and I most eagerly desired to rush to Shakir's house at that very moment. Somehow or the other, I passed the night and went to the old Haveli early next morning. During the previous evening, I had talked to Shakir about the continuation of her daughter's studies and he had assured me to talk to her fiancé about the matter.

When I told Shakir that I was going to the old Haveli, there was nothing unusual about it, because, I had often invited my friends to the parties which were arranged at that place. Whenever Kamran came from London, we used to spend most of our time at the same old Haveli. How lively I was in those days. The whole building used to echo with our noisy activities, loud music and laughter. On such occasions, Nighat and Auntie used to prepare delicious dishes at our request. During the rainy season, we used to go to the garden at the back of the Haveli and loved to spend our time eating hot and crispy Samosas, Pakoras and Pooris. Crates of cold drinks were placed in the garden for our refreshment. To add to our joy, huge baskets full of mangoes were loaded on the carts and brought to the Haveli. Until a few weeks ago, I was full of liveliness, vivacity and vibrant energy. But then, it seemed as if love suddenly squeezed out my soul from the body.

Whenever the watchman or some other servant told Nighat and Auntie about my coming to the Haveli, they would at once ask him about the number of guests coming with me. After gathering this information, they would immediately prepare the tea or breakfast with all the essential items and send it to me. If I went there alone, Nighat herself used to come to talk to me. She was very fond of getting and reading new books. In the presence of Shakir, she could not make any such request, because, he used to scold her on such occasions.

The same thing happened that day. When Nighat came to know about my coming to the Haveli, she at once came there carrying tea and a plate full of salty biscuits. Signs of immense joy were vividly visible on her face. She told me that during the previous night, Shakir had allowed her to continue her studies. She knew very well that it was the outcome of my efforts and she sincerely thanked me for it. I did not know how to start the discussion for which I had specially come to her that morning. She also noticed the mental conflict through which I was passing at that time.

"Brother Hammad, what's the matter? You seem to be somewhat lost."

"Niggy, do you remember the girl who collided with me in the room on the eve of your engagement ceremony?"

"Which girl? Yes, mother had told me about the incident," replied Nighat with a smile on her face, while pouring tea into the cup.

"She was Iman, the daughter of Maulvi Alimuddin, who lives in an old quarter of the city, where once we too lived. She is a very nice girl."

Then she looked attentively towards me, as if some idea had come to her mind. "Brother, what's the matter? Why are you asking about her?"

She had a mischievous look which made me nervous. How difficult it is to hide some of the truths of our heart. There was a time, when all of us used to tease her while discussing the topic of her engagement and marriage. Sometimes, we used to tease her so much with this topic that she began to weep. But today, the situation was totally different. Her mischievous smile had robbed me of my confidence, because, there was a secret in my heart which I had not yet revealed to her.

"No there's nothing particular about her," I said rather timidly. "In fact I, I."

Nighat understood my secret and said, "So that's the matter. Brother, don't try to make some mischief with her. She is a very innocent friend of mine and belongs to an extremely religious family."

Nighat knew about many of my girl friends and was well aware of my flirting and non-serious behaviour with them. While I was enquiring about Iman, she thought that Perhaps I wanted to show the same routine behaviour to Iman. I held Nighat's hand and asked her to sit beside me.

"Sit down Nighat and listen to me carefully."

Then, I told her the whole story from A to Z. She listened to the whole story with astonishment.

"Nighat, now tell me what to do. 'I'm in a very precarious situation.'"

"It's a very complicated affair. Miss Iman has deprived my dear brother of his sleep and calm. But the problem is that she's not that sort of a girl which you think her to be. Not to speak of talking to unknown men, she has always avoided even the shadow of such men. She has received all her education in veil and the honour of her family is dearer to her than her own life. Every family living in her neighbourhood wishes to make her their daughter-in-law. You're not the first boy to become the victim of her charm. During the past few years, several boys have been wandering through her street, in the hope of seeing a glimpse of hers, but she never looked towards them. My sincere advice to you is, stop thinking about her. It's a pretty complex affair," she remarked with a loud laugh and added, "You won't lose anything in this game, but I'll lose my dearest friend forever."

I was angry at Nighat's words and stood up to leave.

"All right Nighat. Don't do anything. I'll do something myself."

As I stepped forward, Nighat caught my hand with a mischievous smile on her face. "O my dear brother, don't be annoyed with me. You seem to be really serious about Iman. If it is the case, I'll have to do something."

"Then consider the matter seriously and think of some plan. Won't you do this little favour to your brother?"

Nighat and I sat down together and began considering the various options available to us for conveying the feelings of my heart to Iman. The discussion continued for a long time. The suggestions which I put forward were rejected by her, while her proposals were dismissed by me and we failed to reach some definite conclusion. One of my suggestions was to send a short letter to Iman through Nighat but Nighat outrightly rejected the idea and told me that instead of reading any such letter, Iman would simply tear it and throw it away. Moreover, in such a situation, Iman might permanently break off her relations with her.

At last, I was utterly exhausted with this prolonged discussion and sat down, holding my head in my hands. Nighat could not see this wretched condition of her dear brother and determined to make Haya her confidant in the matter. It was decided that Nighat would invite Haya and Iman to her house on some pretext. She knew that Maulvi Alimuddin was a very strict man and staunchly adhered to his principles, but she was confident that somehow or the other, she would be able to persuade him to allow her daughters to come to her house just once. Nighat promised that I would be informed of Iman's visit to her house beforehand; and during her visit, she (Nighat) would arrange my short meeting with Iman in loneliness. I knew how difficult it would be for Nighat. But for the sake of my love, she decided to put her childhood friendship at stake.

It was decided that the plan would be executed on the coming Thursday. But before my return from the Haveli, Nighat again and again asked me to assure her that I was not flirting with Iman as I had been doing with so many other girl friends of mine. At last, I had to pull her ears in order to assure her of my sincerity and earnestness. But Nighat was not to blame so much for her attitude. After all, Iman who was indeed like a rare and unique gem had been her close intimate friend since her childhood. At that time, I had the feelings of envy for Nighat, who could so easily meet my charming and flower-like sweetheart and hold her hand in hers. I wished to sit there for hours and hours and hear from Nighat about Iman. When someone is really in love, what a blissful experience it is for him to talk and hear about his beloved. Such talking seems more satisfying than food and drinks. Centuries fly away like moments and the whole atmosphere begins to look fascinating without any particular reason. Confused jumbled and noisy sounds are transformed into a harmonious orchestra and cool and pleasant breeze begins to blow in the midst of scorching and suffocating heat of the

sun. Days and nights are spent in a dreamy condition and without any reason, a gentle smile appears on the lips. Even enemies begin to look like friends.

Till the coming Thursday, I too remained in the grip of all such feelings and conditions. It is said that one sided love affairs are full of fears and apprehensions. Same was the case with me. I was surrounded by strange fears and questions. I wondered whether she would be able to come or not. The Maulvi might forbid her to come at the last moment. Would she like to meet me or not? How would she interpret this attempt of mine?

At last came that long awaited and much anticipated Thursday. Nighat had already told me what to do. Silence prevailed everywhere in that summer afternoon. According to her, the time between 3 and 4 p.m. was most appropriate for the meeting. I was supposed to reach the old Haveli by two o'clock. Along the main veranda of the Haveli, large reed screens were spread to keep away the heat of the sun. At the same place, there was a large room. We used to call it the cold room. In fact, there was a time when it used to be my grandfather's study. While constructing this room, it was made sure that it should be in the direction of the blowing wind in summer. It, therefore, used to remain cold even at the time of severe heat in the hot summer afternoons. Large shelves of this room were filled with rare books. I still remember that we used to pass the long summer afternoons, lying in this room and reading the stories of Tarzan and Umru Ayyar.

Nighat had also revealed the fact that Iman had a craze for reading good books and she often used to borrow books from her. Nighat had told her about the rare books kept in my grandfather's study and according to her, Iman had a great desire to have a look at these books. But this study mostly remained closed. Nighat had invited her to the Haveli on the pretext of showing her the study and I too had come that day with the keys of that room in my pocket. At the same time, she had taken Haya into confidence and told her that in reality it was a pretext for enabling me to have a meeting with Iman.

According to the plan, I was supposed to remain inside the study and wait for Haya and Iman. It was decided that Nighat would bring them into the study after which I would get a few moments for expressing my feelings to Iman. Everything else depended on my fate and my performance. It was up to her to listen to me, reject me or return angrily. Sitting in the study in a confused state of mind, I was looking at the old wooden clock on the wall. It was only 2-30 and I had arrived here only half an hour ago. But I had a feeling that I had been sitting there for centuries. The sparrows had built their nest in the large ventilator of the study and at that time, the mother sparrow was resting in the nest with its young ones. The sun was now slowly going down and forming new angles on the wall opposite to the ventilator. At times, waiting proves to be a breath taking experience and so did it seem to me at that moment. In a state of mental agitation and anxiety, I began surveying the books kept in the shelves all around me but could not read anything. Even the slightest sound made me jump from my seat but each sound was followed by a prolonged silence. It was a long characteristic silence of summer afternoons, occasionally interrupted by the cawing of a crow in the distance. Sometimes, I could also hear the sound of a passing tonga or a motor car on the long black desolate road outside the Haveli. Time was slowly ticking away and soon the clock struck. Three. My fears and apprehensions were once again revived and began to multiply. No, she won't come. Haya must have told her all about Nighat's plan. She must have been greatly annoyed with Nighat. We must not have made such a plan. What would she be thinking about me? The whole mistake was mine.

By 3-15, I had completely lost my patience and in this distressed condition, decided to go out of the room. But as soon as I stepped towards the door, I heard some footsteps accompanied by the melodious feminine laughing and talking at some distance in the veranda. Someone was surely coming towards this side and I again became breathless. Of course, it was the sound of Iman's footsteps. O God, give me some courage. As the door opened, Nighat entered the room, followed by Iman and Haya. They were all smiling. On seeing me, Nighat showed an artificial surprise. "O brother Hammad! How is it that you are here at this time?"

Exactly as I had expected, there were signs of nervousness and panic on Iman's face

In this bewilderment, she looked towards me and then immediately turned back to go but Haya was standing in her way and Nighat also firmly gripped her hand making it impossible for her to go anywhere.

“Perhaps, your friend hasn’t liked my presence here. I think I shouldn’t be here.”

The extremely nervous and confused Iman once again lifted her head and looked towards me. Nighat glared at her and said, “No no brother. We’ve only come here to see some old books. In fact, Iman has a craze for reading good books.”

The outraged Iman looked angrily towards Nighat but Nighat still firmly held her hand.

“Sure, why not? Have a look at these old books while I go. I’ll be back soon.”

Having said this, I went out of the study because I no longer found in myself the courage to look towards her. On that day, she was in black dress and was looking all the more fascinating in her black head covering. Time and again, I was visualizing her trembling eye lashes, quivering lips and a scattered strand of hair. Standing outside in the veranda for a while, I attempted to regain control over my nerves. The whole show had been turned upside down. I should have behaved in a completely different manner. On some pretext, I should have sent Nighat and Haya outside the study for a few minutes, during which, I should have talked to Iman. But on seeing her, I had forgotten everything and had rushed out of the room. I was extremely angry with myself and thought that I might never get a chance to meet her again. Perhaps, I had lost the battle forever.

In the meantime, I heard some sound near the study door. I was startled and as I looked towards that side, I saw Nighat stealthily coming out of the room. In angry gestures she asked me why I had behaved like that. In reply I could only shrug. Nighat then signaled to Haya who also came out. I was still standing there silent and dumbfounded. Nighat came forward, held me by the wrist and dragged me to the study door. As she pushed me inside the room, she whispered into my ears, “Only three minutes.”

I was still worried and upset as I entered the study with Nighat’s push. Standing near the last shelf, Iman was reading a book. As she heard the noise, she turned around and looked rather inattentively. Perhaps, she could not even imagine that both Nighat and Haya would leave her alone in the room and instead of them, she would find me standing at the door. In this confusion, the book fell down from her hands. She properly adjusted her head covering and rushed towards the door to get out of the room but how could she do that? The study had only one door where I stood, blocking her path. Realizing the situation, she had to stop as quickly as she had advanced towards the door. In this utter helplessness, her face was becoming red and with her head bent, she was standing silently in the middle of the room. Perhaps, at that time, she was furious at Nighat and Haya and had fully understood their plot. For a few moments, both of us remained silent and the silence between us continued to speak. In this silence, I could even hear her breathing. Then she mustered up her courage and her sweet melodious voice was heard in the room. Like her whole body, her voice was also trembling.

“I want to go out. Please don’t stand in my way.”

It was for the first time that I had heard her uttering so many words together. For a while, I stood silently and then, all of a sudden, I felt as if I had regained my consciousness and I began to speak.

“I’m sorry for blocking your path in such a way. This action of mine may degrade me in your eyes forever. But believe you me I have taken this step only after being compelled by the circumstances. Please don’t have any wrong notions about me.”

“What do you want from me? Please let me go. For God’s sake!”

Her voice was now choking with emotions and the tears gathering around her eye lashes could start falling at any moment.

“The only thing that I wish to tell you is that ever since I’ve seen you, I’ve become a stranger even for myself. I don’t find appropriate words for expressing my feelings and describing my state of mind at this moment. All the words given in all the dictionaries of the world appear too common for me to give bent to my emotions. Perhaps, I’ve adopted a very common and cheap type of method for

talking to you. But what else could I do? I didn't have any other option at my disposal. In a state of extreme helplessness, I've been forced to resort to this vulgar technique for conveying my feelings to you. If possible, please forgive me."

She was still standing quietly, with her head bent and her eyes fixed on the carpet.

"I think you have said what you wanted to say. Now, please let me go. I implore you."

I shall be waiting for your response."

I no longer stood in her way and like a gust of wind, she dashed out of the room with all her delicacy. Only her sweet fragrance was left behind in the room. I saw her through the window that opened towards the outside veranda. She walked past Nighat and Haya without stopping and talking to them. They were running after her and calling her but she was quite indifferent to them. Haya saw me through the window with her mischievous eyes. With a smile she saluted me and then ran after Iman. At that moment, I like her very much. After all, she had trusted an unknown man and sent her dearest sister to meet him. I don't know how Nighat had been able to convince her to facilitate her in this adventure. Anyhow, at this moment, both Nighat and Haya were in an extremely difficult situation. Iman must be greatly annoyed with both of them and I didn't know how Nighat and Haya would persuade her to change her mood.

In a spellbound condition, I sat in the same room for a long time. I didn't have the least desire to go out of the room. I wished to visualize again and again the same delightful scene when that charming and delicate sweetheart of mine was present in the same room, silently standing before me, with her head down, talking to me and quivering like a leaf.

The sun had now gone down and there was no more heat in the light passing through the ventilator. As I looked at my watch, it was 5-30 and with an unwilling heart, I stood up to go. Suddenly, I saw the book that had dropped from Iman's hand and fallen down on the ground. I picked it up. It was Bano Qudsia's novel "Raja Gidh." Near the book, there were two pearls, which I had already seen in Iman's sandals. I remembered that while talking to me, her eyes were constantly fixed on the ground and following her gaze, I had looked towards her feet several times. It was quite obvious that when the book dropped from her hands, it must have fallen for a moment on her feet and at that time, these pearls must have been dislodged from her shoes. I picked up both the pearls and put them into my pocket.

Waiting for Nighat was quite in vain and with heavy steps, I came out. Throughout the night, the scenes of the day remained before my eyes like a movie. My condition was that of a dull student, who does not properly attempt even a single question in the examination and even then, anxiously waits for the result.

Sometimes, we reach that stage in which, we are eager to know the result and are least concerned about the nature of the result. We do not bother to think whether the matter will be decided against us or in our favour. We are only keen to hear the decision whatever it may be. Generally, it happens with those who have weak nerves and are quite incapable of withstanding the pain and agony of waiting. Exhausted and frustrated under extreme mental pressure, they cry out that whatever is to happen, must happen at once. At such moments, they are quite unaware of the fact that although they are horrified at the idea that the result or decision may be against them and yet, they are earnestly praying for its immediate announcement. They do not bother to think about their wretched and miserable condition at the time when the result or decision would be actually announced against them.

I was also passing through a similar situation that night while I was restlessly awaiting Iman's response. I only wanted to hear it immediately and without any delay, no matter what it would be. Another lurking desire of my heart might also have contributed to this hastiness of mine at that time. My heart was desperate for another contact or encounter with my beloved at any cost. I only wished to hear my name from her lips even if she mentioned my name in an offensive or abusive manner. When a person is in love, his heart begins to behave like a little child, who is only concerned with the passing moment, the passing hour and the passing day, quite indifferent to the fears and

apprehensions about future life. He is only interested in the present moment and is least concerned about the consequences of his present actions. As soon as I woke up the next morning, I wished to go to Nighat at that very moment and ask her the details of everything that had happened during the previous day. But it did not seem so appropriate to go to the old Haveli so frequently. It is true that I had always enjoyed a sisterly relationship with Nighat, but what about the other servants who worked in the Haveli and saw me meeting Nighat in loneliness. They might take a negative impression of my frequent visits and meetings with Nighat. Then, I myself shrugged off all such futile, absurd and baseless ideas, apprehensions and suspicions. Perhaps, love teaches a man to be suspicious of himself.

It was 11-30 and I was still in my room, when Shakir came there and gave me a closed envelope from Nighat. Then, as usual, he said, "Yesterday, you went to the Haveli. Was there any special reason for your visit?"

Shakir had asked a common question in a routine manner, but for some unknown reason, it made me nervous.

"Yes. No. Yes. I mean, there was nothing special. I had told Nighat to find some books from the shelves of the study and I went there to collect those books."

With suspicious eyes, Shakir looked towards me and said, "You see, I'll be very much annoyed with you, if you give some more books to Nighat. She must have sent a list of new books in this envelope."

I laughed at Shakir's words. Perhaps, he was thinking something else. I assured him not to give any new book to Nighat during that month.

Immediately after Shakir's departure from the room, I tore up the envelope and brought out Nighat's letter and began reading it with eager and restless eyes.

"My dear brother,
You gave us a very tough time yesterday. She was annoyed with me and angrily went away from my house. She was not even talking to her younger sister. I had told you that she wouldn't like such things. But what is done cannot be undone. Today, I'll go to her house; and Haya and I will try to persuade her to change her mood. But God alone knows how she would decide your case. My advice to you is that you should talk to the members of your family and send some of them to her house. In this way, she would be convinced about the truth of what you said to her yesterday. Otherwise, she is not one of those girls who like to have such relationship without the proper involvement of relatives. Be happy."

In this short letter, Nighat had written exactly what I had expected. Even then, it significantly increased my sadness and restlessness. The same thing happened; anxious anticipation of the result, followed by the restlessness on hearing it. All the peace and calm of my life had been shattered.

But in the midst of all the grim and hopeless circumstances, man never loses the sight of hope. On finding one door shut, he goes to another door and knocks at it and the same process continues to the last moment of his life. If the element of hope had not been gifted to man by Nature, he would have perished with his first failure and passed away with the first disappointment.

I was also filled with a new hope. If Nighat and Haya manage to persuade her to change her mind, she may take some pity on my condition and may say something about me. My heart beats were now awaiting some other message from her, but I had to pass through this agonizing condition of waiting for another few days.

CHAPTER 11

THE YELLOW LONDON

If evening falls in London after a bright sunny day, perhaps, in no other part of the world, can we find a more fascinating evening than this. It becomes even more attractive and charming if it is autumn season. It was also one of those beautiful London evenings. The sky had the redness of the evening twilight, while the earth seemed to be on fire with the red autumnal leaves. It appeared as if some painter had drawn a marvelous picture on the canvas with the help of red and yellow colours only.

Kamran and I were strolling on the desolate road leading from the Hyde Park to the city. The road was covered on both sides with thick peepul trees, whose autumnal leaves were falling on our heads like flowers which are showered on a bridegroom on his marriage day. The severity of cold had compelled us to turn up the collars of our overcoats up to our necks. The heaps of snow on the roadside were slowly melting and falling with a low noise into the drains covered with iron grills. Quite indifferent to the severe cold, a couple was standing near an ice cream van, telling the ice cream seller to prepare cone ice creams of their choice. It is rightly said that ice cream tastes most delicious at the time of severe cold. In her dress, the girl herself looked like a colourful ice cream. The boy whispered something into her ears and both of them laughed loudly. As usual, Kamran made a bad face and condemned the mental level of all the beautiful young girls of London. The sun was setting in the distance and it seemed as if the road were taking us straight towards the ball of the setting sun.

“Dear Medi, whatever may be the case, I’m apprehensive about the intentions of that Jewess. You’ve come here in search of peace. Give up your studies for a few days and I’ll also take some days off. Let’s go to Switzerland in search of new loves. What do you say to that?”

I knew that Kamran wanted to set out in search of such new loves. “Mend your ways Mr. Kamran. One after another, three girls left you after remaining engaged to you for a whole year, only because of your own actions. Now, do you want to have double hattrick?”

We had now reached near the large fountain in the square. In the middle of the fountain, there was a big iron lion which was emitting sprays of water instead of blood from its mouth. However, at that time, a few sprays of water had melted and assumed the form of thin snow bows. The last tram was about to leave. We ran towards that yellow tram having red lines on it and got into it. A gipsy woman wearing a long dress was also sitting in the tram with other passengers. Both she and Kamran laughed as they saw each other. In astonishment, I looked towards Kamran.

“Do you know her?”

“No. But it makes no difference. She knows me and that’s why she is smiling while looking towards me.”

Then, the gipsy warmly stretched out her arms and advanced towards Kamran. Kamran was jubilant like a rose in full bloom and he too extended his hands. The gipsy passed between us and was soon locked in a warm embrace with a dirty looking Negro, who had long hair and was standing behind us. Kamran stood there with his outstretched arms and in the end, I had to embrace him. For a few moments, he stood still, in a mood of anger and amazement and then, both of us laughed heartily while the train was slowly heading for its destination.

Some people consider love to be the purest emotion of life and are of the opinion that no other emotion can be purer than love. As a coincidence, neither I nor Kamran agreed to this theory and interestingly, we had quite different views about this matter.

I considered hatred to be the world’s purest emotion. There can be some defect or adulteration in love but hatred is always, real, genuine and intense. Kamran on the other hand regarded lust as the world’s purest emotion. He was of the view that man is pure and truthful only in the case of lust, while he is dishonest somewhere or somehow in case of all other emotions. The fact is that whether it is love or hatred, infatuation or lust, they all seem to me four different sides of one and the same emotion. I had always regarded as hypocrites all those people who hate on the basis of love or those

who hide their lust in order to prove the truth of their infatuation. Sometimes I thought that those who openly admit their feelings of lust, are the only brave and truthful people in the world. Perhaps, lust is the world's only eternal and lasting relationship and all of us are the product of one such relationship.

Once again, before going to bed that night, Kamran advised me not to have any row with sir Isaac's daughter miss Sarah, because, since my childhood, he had been fully aware of one particular habit of mine. I could handle a situation only to a certain extent but whenever I began to be obsessed with that particular matter or situation, I became reckless and attempted to tackle it, regardless of my own benefit or loss. Kamran knew very well that I had come to London to get rid of the dark shadows of my past and, therefore, he did not want me to be entangled in any tense situation.

But perhaps, at that moment, Nature was not in favour of Kamran's desires, because, the very next morning, the first person with whom I had an encounter was none other than miss Sarah. When I reached the university compound, I found Joseph standing at his favourite place on the bank of the stream, throwing grains for the birds. As he saw me from a distance, he began calling me with the motion of his hand. There was still some time left for the start of the period and I thought of spending some time in the company of Joseph. But as soon as I went up the bridge which joined both banks of the stream, Sarah also arrived there with the gang of her four friends. Her friends included two girls and two boys and all of them were the students of my class. As Sarah passed by me, she said a few words in Hebrew without knowing that the study of old languages had once been a field of special interest for me. As some people are fond of ticket collecting, stamp collecting and painting, in the same way, there was a time, when my only hobby was getting information about old languages of the world. I had inherited this hobby from my grandfather. Some rare books dealing with old languages could still be found in the library of the old Haveli. They included the copies of the Torah and the Psalms. I had read these books and felt no difficulty in understanding Sara's words. She had made some blasphemous remarks about my religion. Instead of English, she had used the Hebrew language, because, perhaps, her main intention was receiving praise from her friends, besides insulting me. I could also talk in Hebrew to some extent and, therefore, I replied her in Hebrew. "No religion allows its followers to use abusive language for any other religion. In fact, those who are abusing other religions, are abusing their own religion."

On hearing me talking in Hebrew, Sarah was stunned and dumb founded for a moment. She could never have imagined that I would be able to understand her words and give a befitting reply in her own language. One of the boys from her group, who perhaps, did not understand Hebrew, hurriedly went to Sarah and asked her what I had said to her. Sarah was still standing silently and I began to walk forward. But in the meantime, the other boy came there and stood in my way. For a while, we stood there glaring at each other, without saying anything. Joseph who was observing the whole scene from a distance, understood the gravity of the situation. He at once started coming towards us. While he was still at some distance, he shouted, "Hi Hammad! Where are you? Come here at once. I've got some important things to discuss with you."

Since Joseph was teaching at the same University, the boys thought it better to remain silent in his presence. I also removed the boy from my way and advanced towards Joseph. Sarah and her group also went in another direction.

As Joseph looked towards me, he seemed worried. "What were they saying to you?"

"Nothing. I didn't know that religious prejudice has spread even to such major universities after the 9-11 attacks."

"You'd better have no dispute with these people. All of them are the children of high class aristocratic Jews. They may create any trouble for you at any moment."

Soon, Joseph and I went to our favourite bench and sat there. A cluster of pigeons picked up the grains and flew away with a loud coo and they were replaced by some new ones.

"I don't wish to have any quarrel with anyone here. But I don't know why they always cross my way. I wonder what wrong I've done to them."

Joseph brought out some more grains from his brown paper envelope and tossed them in the air and began to speak. "I know you always mind your own business and you've never attempted to have any row with them. But these students regard this university as their estate and its students as their subjects and you are not behaving like their loyal and humble subjects."

"What do you mean?" How can I behave like their loyal subjects?"

"The fact is that there is a touch of dignity and pride in the way you behave, talk and walk. You don't seem to be bullied or brow beaten by anyone; and this is exactly what they dislike. How can they tolerate someone who stands with dignity and honour before them and who is not ready to be bullied by them?"

I became angry. "But why should I be afraid of them or brow beaten by them? There must be some reason for it. I haven't come here on some charity scholarship. I've paid thousands of pounds as fee and passed the University's merit test. Perhaps, the amount of money which I pay as donation and fee is more than that of every other student at the University because, I've been granted admission on a special seat. Then, why should I be afraid of anyone?"

"Your heavy fees and donations have silenced these Jewish businessmen. You're like a gold mine for them which they don't want to lose although you are a Muslim. If you don't mind, the fact is that the thing that has brought you to this university is not your ability but the bank statement attached to your application form."

"But how did you come to know of all these things?" I asked him in utter astonishment.

"Perhaps, you haven't considered the fact that there are only a small number of Muslim students at the University. Most of them are only so-called Muslims and have got so much mixed up with the followers of other religions that they have completely lost their own separate identity. But you look quite different from them. Another important point to remember is that while giving admission to a student, this university thoroughly scrutinizes his ancestral line. It may be that they didn't find any troublesome character in the list of your predecessors."

I was startled and looked towards him in bewilderment. He might have uttered these words in a casual manner. But whatever he had said was absolutely correct. My grandfather and great grandfather had been extremely loyal to the British government which used to give them regular allowances for their loyalty. No rebel had ever been born in our previous seven generations.

"I carefully looked towards Joseph. "But why are you telling me all these things? After all, you're also a part of the administration of this university. Why are you disclosing to me the secrets of the university administration?"

Joseph smiled. "Sometimes I'm surprised to think that there's something in you that gives the impression that you're not a stranger to me. You look quite different from others because, perhaps, you loved somebody most intensely in your life and I've always held in high esteem all those people who love sincerely and intensely."

A smile appeared on my lips. "It appears as if you also loved somebody in your life. But how can you say that I must have loved someone most intensely in my life? I may be even quite ignorant of the passion of love."

"It's simply impossible. Your eyes can never tell a lie. Perhaps, you yourself are unaware of the numerous secrets and pains of love that lie hidden in the depths of these eyes. Love gives calm and composure to man. Outwardly, he may look calm and peaceful. But inwardly, he is extremely restless. You're also one such calm and peaceful sea which contains thousands of fierce storms."

I took a long breath and realized that the secrets of my heart were becoming evident from my face. Where to go and how to hide the bits of the mirror of my broken heart?

Joseph and I sat quietly for some time on the bench. There was some vibration in the air with the flowing of the water in the canal in front of us. All around us, there were the sounds of the pigeons and other birds picking up the grains of food. As the cold air struck against my eyes, I realized that my eyes had become wet. From the pocket of my coat, I took out the thick dark glasses and put them

on. It is better for the secrets of the heart to remain inside the heart. But when they start flowing out from the eyes it is better to conceal them.

CHAPTER 12

THE NOON OF LOVE

Love slowly descends upon man like the heat of the sun. It resembles the blazing heat of the sun in a desert, in the months of June and July. It is not possible to have an exact idea of its intensity in the early hours of the morning. But as the day progresses, its intensity begins to reveal itself with all its manifestations. Same is the case with love. When the noon of love draws near, the lover is wrecked by restlessness and bitterness. His throat is parched with severe thirst and he begins to feel himself half dead and half alive.

Quite unknowingly, I had crossed the morning of love and was now in the noon of love with all its severity and intensity. I did not even fully enjoy the calm and tranquility of the morning of love. But by the time I recovered from the first jolt of love, I found myself in the scorching heat of the noon of love.

After being detained in the study of the old Haveli, Iman was furious and so much annoyed with her dearest friend Nighat and her younger sister Haya that for several days, she did not talk to them. But Nighat who was stubbornly determined, went to her house, sat in the unpaved courtyard and threatened to remain there as long as Iman did not forgive her. At last, Iman's mother had to intervene. She requested both Nighat and Iman to settle their dispute before the return of the Maulvi and Abdullah. She was particularly worried about the Maulvi who might get a negative impression on seeing Nighat sitting in the courtyard at that hour of the night. Both his daughters were afraid of him and finally, Iman had to surrender. She held Nighat's arm and took her to the room which was used by her and her sister Haya. As soon as they entered the room, Iman could no longer control her feelings and burst into tears, while holding Nighat in her arms. She got a solemn pledge from Nighat that in future, she would not do anything which might spoil the honour of her parents. Nighat made this promise but at the same time, she tried her best to convince Iman that I was not one of those boys who were in the habit of flirting with young innocent girls. She swore by her parents in an attempt to assure her the truth and sincerity of my passion. But in reply, the only thing which Iman said was that only her parents had the right to decide all the matters of her life including the issue of her marriage. She emphatically said that she would willingly submit to all the decisions of her parents about her life whatever they might be. As far as the matter under discussion was concerned, Iman said that she did not want to hear or say anything more about it.

Nighat called me to the old Haveli and told the whole story to me. She again insisted that if I really wanted to see some progress in the matter, the only option left open to me was that I should send the members of my family to Iman's house with the marriage proposal.

I was satisfied with the thought that till then, Iman had not been engaged to someone. However, it was quite obvious that something had to be done most urgently because that paragon of beauty must have been the sweetheart and favourite choice for a large number of other suitors. But at the same time, I was fully aware of the possible reaction of the members of my family. How could the most influential and richest family of the city agree to my marriage with the daughter of a poor Maulvi? Of course, everyone would describe it as something below the dignity and prestige of our family. But I had to talk to the members of my family, because, I was left with no other choice. In order to gain access to the Maulvi's family, I needed the identity of my family, because till then, I had no identity of my own.

Then, whatever I had anticipated, actually took place. It seemed as if the whole family had been hit by a massive earthquake. Mother was the first to cry out, "What! What the hell do you mean by all this nonsense! Are you out of your mind!"

The Commissioner was furious. Emitting the smoke of the pipe from his mouth he roared, "So this lad is going to spoil the honour of our seven generations."

“What rubbish!” remarked Abrina with an unpleasant expression on her face. “I knew beforehand that this boy would do something like this” was the spontaneous reaction of my elder brother Sajjad

Among all the members of my family, my younger brother Ibad was the only one who had some encouraging words for me. “Great brother Medi great! It’s a wonderful choice. Best of luck.”

But poor Ibad did not know that good wishes alone cannot change a person’s bad luck into good luck. Moreover, I had to redraw the line of my fate. I was required to dig up a canal of milk only with the help of a spade. The mountain digger was again being put to test.

My parents and all the other elders of my family refused to hear anything from me about this matter. One day, while all of us were sitting around the dining table, I again started the same topic. My outraged father angrily threw the fork and spoon on the plate and shouted, “Enough is enough! No more with your stories of romance and listen to me attentively. Next week, you’re going to England. I’ve arranged your admission at a famous university of London. Go to London, get the two years’ degree from the university and then we’ll think about your marriage.”

“But I don’t want to go to London. “I’m not at all interested in the Economics degree.”

“Then what else are you interested in?” asked Mother and added, “What spell has that lady cast on you in such a short time?”

How could Abrina remain silent in such a situation? “I had become suspicious of her when she came here to attend the party and was sitting here like a very pious and righteous girl. Oh these low class people!”

I could no longer hear this fuss. I immediately stood up, threw the napkin on the table and angrily went out of the room. While I was going, I could hear my mother talking loudly to my father. “You see, how proud and arrogant he has become. I say that”

But before the completion of her sentence, I had left the dining hall. If only I had heard her full sentence that night. In that case the horrible thing that happened the next day, could have been avoided.

With the exception of Ibad, all the members of my family had boycotted me. The next day, while I was silently sitting in my room, I suddenly heard the loud voice of Abrina who seemed to be quarrelling with someone. At first, I did not pay any attention towards her because such dramatic scenes had become a routine matter in the house in those days. But after some time, I realized that the matter was related to me. I immediately came out of my room and went near the railing. As I looked downstairs, I could see Maulvi Alimuddin standing in the lounge, with the sweat of shame on his forehead and tears of sorrow in his eyes. His whole body was trembling while mother and Abrina were showering heaps of abuses on him. I felt as if the earth had slipped from beneath my feet. While I still stood there, I shouted, “Mother, it’s too much, stop it now!”

As soon as Mother and Abrina saw me, they became silent and moved towards the drawing room adjacent to the lounge. With heavy steps, the Maulvi also turned in order to go out. By the time I put on my shoes and rushed to that place, he had gone near the gate with his cycle. I ran towards that side and stood in his way. Tears which were still running out of his eyes had made his beard wet. I did not know what to say and how to say it. I only folded my hands and stood before him. Then, mustering up my courage, I began to speak. “I apologize to you on their behalf. Although their crime is unpardonable, even then I implore you.”

The Maulvi lifted up his eyes and saw me. I felt myself devastated and lowered my eyes as I noticed that his eyes were full of complaints.

“What wrong have I done to you Mr. Hammad? A poor man has got only one thing to be proud of and that is his honour. Today you have robbed me of that precious asset of mine. Today, my innocent girls have been openly disgraced and humiliated only because of you. If only if only I could curse you, but. Anyhow, I believe in the justice of Allah and He will surely do justice in my case.”

The Maulvi was saying all these words in a highly emotional manner. Afterwards, without saying anything else, He mounted his bicycle and went away while with my bent head I remained standing near the gate.

Violent storms began to blow in my mind. I had not previously thought that the members of my family could fall down to such an extent. I knew that they could not suppress me but perhaps, during the previous night, they had decided to crush the cause of my revolt. If I had been aware of their evil designs beforehand, I would have met the Maulvi on the way and told him to go back. If only I could know about the situation well in time. But now, what was done could not be undone. Mother and Abrina had got the opportunity to launch their attack on the Maulvi and they had fully utilized the opportunity. They had abused him and insulted him by saying that he was in the habit of sending his daughters to the parties of the rich people hoping that they would ensnare or entice some rich boy. They had given him that month's salary and ordered him never to come to their house again. It is not difficult to imagine that after hearing all such disdainful accusations, a white collared and honourable man like the Maulvi must have been left with no option other than death. But people like the Maulvi do not have the opportunity to enjoy the luxury of death at their will. If suicide had not been forbidden in Islam, he would surely have finished his life that very day. Everything had happened because of me and I was responsible for his insult and disgrace. At that time, I was full of hatred for myself. As I angrily returned home, I shattered into fragments whatever lay in my way in the drawing room, the lounge and the lobby. The frightened Abrina locked herself up in her room but I had another heated debate with my mother. Like a typical traditional woman, she taunted me and accused me of coming under the influence of some charm or spell cast by the members of the Maulvi's family. Then, she began shedding tears, because, tears are the last weapon which a mother can use to persuade her children. That very night, the Commissioner gave his final judgment about me. I would never be allowed to break the family traditions and I would have to fly to London the very next week. I did not have any discussion with the Commissioner that night, Because, I had also decided something and I knew very well what to do.

With the first light of the next morning, I left my house and went to the old Haveli where Shakir had already got some information about the matter from other servants but he was still unaware of the full details. Seeing me in the Haveli in the early hours of the morning he was much worried. He immediately took me to the round room of the Haveli.

"What's all this? Is it true what I've heard? Was the Maulvi really dismissed from his job yesterday? Sharafat the watchman has told me about it."

"Whatever you have heard is correct. Everything has happened because of me."

Then, I told him the whole story from a to z. Shakir held his head in his hands and remained sitting there. "O Mr. Hammad, what a strange thing you've done. You know very well that the members of your family would never agree to this marriage; and as far as the Maulvi is concerned, he is a very sensitive and delicate person. And look what Nighat has done. I never expected her to do such a stupid thing."

"Nighat is not to blame for whatever has happened. She simply couldn't refuse to help me. Don't say anything to her."

"All right Mr. Hammad, but how to compensate for the injustice done to the Maulvi by the members of your family?"

"I'll compensate for that injustice. I want you to go to the Maulvi's house with my marriage proposal."

Shakir jumped from his place. "What! What are you saying Mr. Hammad? How can I do it?"

"There's no other alternative for me now. My parents would never go to the Maulvi's house with the marriage proposal and the stain of dishonour which has come upon the Maulvi's family because of me, would never be removed. I've therefore, made the final decision. Now you've got to decide whether you would help me or not."

Shakir silently sat there lost in some deep thought. Nighat entered the room and placed the tray with tea cups on the table. After pouring the tea into the tea cups, she silently left the room.

At last, Shakir lifted his head. "You've put me in a very difficult test. On one hand there is my old friendship with the Maulvi and the other hand, there are those countless favours that you've been

doing to me and my family for the last several years. In this adventure, I may lose my old friendship with the Maulvi, but what else can I do? I can't lose you at any cost."

With a deep breath, Shakir became silent but I could foresee a horrible storm behind this silence.

CHAPTER 13

MEMORIES

At times, memories play a strange game with us. They compel us to laugh by thinking about the time when we once wept with somebody. In the same way, they compel us to weep by thinking about the time when we laughed with someone. After that brief encounter with Sarah, which involved the exchange of Hebrew words, Sarah had become careful. Although at times she taunted me, yet the element of caution was evident from her attitude. Almost daily, I used to meet Joseph on our favourite bench. As we became more frank and familiar, he told me several things about his personal life. For instance he told me that he had three children who had left him one by one after growing up. Now, only he and his wife lived together under one roof. He was still teaching at the university because he had no other source of income and because he did not want to go to the old men's home. One day, while returning from the university, he took me to his home in Bridgetown. His wife Mary was a kind old lady who had a strange deep sadness in her eyes. She behaved with me like a mother who meets her son after a very long time. I stayed there for a long time during which she served me with a number of things which she herself had cooked. While I was begging leave from her, she filled my pockets with several eatable things just like the elderly women of my village. I then remembered my childhood during which, whenever I used to go to meet my maternal and paternal grandmothers, they used to fill my pockets with walnuts, apricots, pistachios and other such things while I was on my way back to the city. Perhaps, the same type of language is used throughout the world for the expression of love. It is sweet like honey and it burns the eyes like raw smoke.

Like an unfaithful beloved, the weather of London is also quite unreliable. For a moment, you may be experiencing the heat of the sun but the very next moment, you may have to open your umbrella for protecting yourself from the rain. The same thing happened that morning. Before going to the university, as I looked out of the window, the sun was shining brightly. But by the time I came out of the flat and reached the road side coffee machine, the sky had become completely overcast and when I reached the University, the rain had actually started. With the rain falling on me and the bag of my notes on my shoulders, I reached the classroom. But contrary to my expectations, the class room was empty. Had I come earlier or was the lecture to be delivered in some other room? As I turned to leave the hall, I looked at the blackboard and the words written on it prevented me from going out. Some highly insulting anti-Muslim sentences had been written on the blackboard. At the end of each sentence, there was the typical Jewish sign known as David Star (six cornered star). Each sentence reflected the venomous feelings which the writer had for the Muslims.

“Down with the Muslims*” “Terrorists*” “We are the only great*” “Muslims leave this campus*”

I knew that I was the only Muslim in the class and the whole thing had been written for me. I also knew the person who had written these sentences which sent a heat wave in my blood. For the first time I realized that there was some truth in what Kamran had said about the Jews. In the meantime, an Australian class fellow of mine named Rebecca entered the class. As she saw the writings on the blackboard, she looked towards me in surprise.

“Hi Medi, who the devil has written this whole fuss on the blackboard?”

“The most impudent and arrogant girl in the class. Who else could have done it?”

“You mean Sarah? No, she can't do it.”

“Rebecca, if you meet her, tell her I didn't know that those who regard themselves so great are so weak that they don't have the courage to say something straight into the face of their enemies.”

After giving her this message, I came out of the classroom. It was drizzling outside and I was in no mood of taking the class. Whenever there was a heavy rainfall or snowfall, large blue and yellow umbrellas were opened on the grassy lawns and on the wooden benches along the bank of the canal that passed through the centre of the University. As I went towards that side, I saw Joseph sitting on a bench under one such umbrella along the canal bank. That day, he had brought the canvas for painting the scene of the falling rain. The rain drops falling in the canal were causing vibration in the

water and this vibration was giving birth to different types of images on the surface of water. Joseph was busy painting all these images on his canvas.

I went near him and started examining his paintings. He was indeed an excellent painter and had beautifully depicted the image of the back of the University building in the canal water. But instead of being a motionless painting of the image, it was the picture of the changes taking place in the image due to the falling of the drops of rain in the canal water. Joseph had paid full attention towards minute details of the scene. While he was still busy in his painting, he turned and looked towards me.

“What about this painting?”

“It’s wonderful. It appears as if the canvas itself is a canal on which you are throwing rain water.”

Joseph clapped his hands in delight. “That’s great. No one has ever praised my paintings in such a perfect manner. The words you use are indeed excellent. I make my paintings with the help of colours while you do the same thing with the help of words.”

After giving finishing touches to his painting, Joseph came to me and sat on the bench beside me.

“What’s the matter? You seem to be somewhat disturbed today.”

I narrated to him the incident that had taken place in the classroom. Joseph too was angry.

“There must be some limits of narrow mindedness. Even then, I agree with Rebecca that Sarah can’t do such things. Perhaps, I haven’t told you that before getting admission in this university, Sarah used to be my student at another institution, where I used to teach painting to the evening classes. She herself is a very good painter. It’s true that she is full of hatred for you people and in this connection, she can go to any length. But the fact is that she is in the habit of openly attacking her enemies and, therefore, I firmly believe that she can’t do such cheap things. She believes that attacking the enemy from behind the back is an insult for the Jews.”

I nodded my head rather indifferently and said, “You may be all right in your views about her, but one thing is quite obvious that my confrontation with these people is becoming indispensable. Perhaps, propaganda is the main weapon used by the Jews.”

“You’ve rightly understood the matter. For this very reason, they are the dominant force in the global business. In a most tactful manner, they’re using their business for the sake of their propaganda and are employing their propaganda for the promotion and expansion of their business. Through this business, they’ve earned so much wealth that now they’ve become the king makers in the most powerful countries of the world. It may be in your knowledge that Jews are the founders of the franchise system, on the basis of which, they have expanded their business in every nook and corner of the world today.”

I looked attentively towards Joseph and remarked, “If they are so successful in the world, why are they so much afraid of others?”

Joseph smiled and said “Perhaps, from the very first day, they have been destined to remain in a state of fear. God sent the largest number of His messengers to the Jewish nation. As many as four thousand prophets including Moses were sent to them. If we divide this number by the number of their generations, we’ll come to know that on average, one generation had ninety prophets. Even then, this nation remained in a state of misguidedness and this fear is the fear of the same misguidedness.”

I was listening to the words of Joseph in a state of utter astonishment. I did not know that he had so much knowledge about Jewish history. Joseph took a long breath and continued to speak. “Anyhow, I again advise you to avoid confrontation with these people, because, in the clash of the head and the stone, it is always the head that is injured. They are obsessed with the idea of their glory and superiority and it is impossible to remove such ideas from their minds.”

All of a sudden, as the rainfall intensified, there was an increased activity in the ripples which were being formed in the canal water in front of us. Frightened by the heavy rain, a cluster of geese took a long flight in the air and the flapping of their wings made a peculiar sound in the atmosphere. Joseph started gathering his paintings and other things. I also assisted him in this work but

throughout this period, I was constantly thinking about what Joseph had said about the Jews. Perhaps, he too had noticed my thoughts.

“What are you thinking” about?”

“I’m thinking that somehow or the other, these Jews also know that they are not great themselves and that some other people are great. They are afraid that the next generation of these really great people may once again recognize its greatness. That’s why, the Jews are not ready to allow these people or their coming generations to feel confident or to become aware of their real greatness. It is said that if a lie is repeatedly and continuously told for a long time, there comes a time when this lie is considered to be a truth and people start regarding the truth as a lie. Perhaps, the Jews are also acting upon the same formula. They know that their lie is being accepted as a truth in the world while our truth is being condemned in the whole world as a lie. Currently, the world is governed by the principle of might is right. Whatever the mighty and powerful people say is believed to be an undeniable truth and at this time, it’s the Jews who are the most powerful people in the world.”

While listening to me, Joseph was also lost in some deep thoughts.

CHAPTER 14

THE INCOMPLETE LOVE

After requesting Shakir to take my marriage proposal to the Maulvi's house, when I returned home that evening, I noticed that the Commissioner was extremely angry. While I was going upstairs from the lounge, I was halted by his loud roar.

"Stop here."

I stopped there. Mother, brother Sajjad and his wife Abrina also came out of their rooms. Father was present there with all the arrogance and pride of a Commissioner while I stood before him with my head bent like a B class criminal.

"So you won't go to London?"

"I'm ready to go to London if you make amends for the misbehaviour shown to Maulvi Alimuddin in this house."

"What!" roared the Commissioner.

"So you want that Retired Commissioner Amjad Raza, who has access even to the President house, should apologize to an ordinary Maulvi. Just forget it."

"Then all of you should also forget that I would ever act upon any of your instructions."

As I started going upstairs, the Commissioner roared again with all his wrath and fury. "Perhaps, you're forgetting the fact that only my orders and instructions are acted upon in the house under whose roof you are living."

In other words, I was being indirectly threatened that if I refused to comply with the Commissioner's orders, I would be expelled from the house. I was not particularly surprised at this warning, because, while he was in office, the Commissioner must have been expelling the criminals from his town and city exactly in the same manner. Moreover, I had committed the most heinous crime, that is, the crime of love and this crime has never been considered pardonable. I was standing in the courtroom of my family as a criminal of love.

I turned and looked towards the Commissioner. "Does it mean that I'm no longer entitled to live in this house?"

Mother looked worried. Perhaps, she was apprehensive that things were not going in the right direction.

"No my dear son, why should we want any such thing to happen? We only wish that you should remove the thought of that girl from your mind."

"I believe that it's easier for me to leave this house than removing her thought from my mind and heart."

I started going towards the main gate in order to go out. Mother shouted from behind me, "Hammad, What stupidity it is!"

In a scornful and contemptuous manner, the Commissioner thundered again.

"Let him go. In a day or two, he'll become aware of the prices of things and the meaning of living away from the comforts and luxuries of home. This prince of ours, who has spent his whole life drinking mineral water, sleeping in air conditioned rooms and enjoying the service of a battalion of servants, has not yet seen even a single glimpse of the difficulties and hardships of the outside world. Let him remain outside the home for a single night and you'll see that he'll automatically get rid of this demon of love. He doesn't even know how to walk properly. Tell us Mr., are you capable of going to the place where you wish to go or should I ask the driver to take you to that place?"

I turned towards the Commissioner. "Parents should teach their children how to walk. It's an unfortunate thing that you haven't taught me how to walk but time is a great teacher. It teaches a person even those things which his parents have forgotten to teach him. Sooner or later, I'll learn how to live without your servants, air conditioners and mineral water. Even if I fail to learn such things, rest assured that I won't come to you for help."

Mother continued to shout; brother Sajjad was dumbfounded while in a state of extreme frustration and agitation, Father kept on emitting smoke from his pipe.

All the open ways of the city lay in front of me and over my head was the blazing sky. I did not know where to go. Father was right to say that I had never gone out of the house on foot. I had seen every road and street of the city only through the wind screen of my cars of the latest model. That day, while walking on these paths on foot, I was for the first time realizing their length and their scenes.

It is said that everyone talks of changing the world but no one makes any serious attempt to change himself. It was the day when I had started the efforts to change myself. Sitting for a long time on a bench in a park, I contemplated on this totally changed situation. I had thrown away my ATM card in front of the members of my family in the lounge while I was leaving the house and now, I had only a few hundred rupees in my pocket. I wondered how these rupees had remained in my pocket. Evening was slowly descending into the park and those people who were strolling in the park or relaxing there, had started going home one after the other. In a short while, the park became empty and at the time of the Maghrib Prayer, the watchman of the park came to me and informed me of the closure of the park. It was obvious that he wanted to tell me that the park had to be closed and, therefore, I should also go home. But on that day, I had no home at all, so where to go? The building which I had considered to be my home since my childhood, turned out to be the court of the Commissioner, where I could live only as long as I submitted myself to his dictates. I suggest that at the start of each year, all such parents should tell their children to fill in a contract form, having all the terms and conditions pertaining to their stay with them. These terms and conditions should be read out to their children annually so that they may never make the mistake of regarding that building as their home.

Darkness of the night was now descending on the roads where the heavy gas lamps placed on the carts had been lit. While walking on the road, I saw the gate of the Government Civil Hospital. I could still remember that during childhood, on our way back home from school, Kamran and I used to stop here, because my uncle was working as civil surgeon in this hospital at that time. After crossing the hospital, one could see a road leading to a square. My school was situated next to the square. Whenever we went to the uncle's office, we used to make a lot of noise in the long corridors of the hospital and played on the roads of the hospital covered with pine trees for several hours. I further remembered those long wooden benches which were placed under the high evergreen trees. These benches were used for sleeping by those poor people who had come with their patients from far off areas and who could not afford to rent a room or stay in a hotel in the city. That strange night of my life was going to be spent on one of those benches. In my disturbed state of mind, I did not even think of those few hundred rupees which were present in the pocket of my shirt.

I went there and lay on one of those wooden benches. After a long time in my life, I felt the open sky and shining stars talking to me. I remembered those memorable summer nights of childhood which we used to spend with our grandmother. At night, our beds were laid in the open courtyard and as Grandmother started telling interesting stories, we used to feel that the stars shining on our heads were also listening to her stories. These smiling stars remained awake as long as we did not go to sleep after listening to the story. They went on playing with us and talking to us as long as the story continued.

I felt as if the stars of my childhood had once again come to me that night to share my loneliness. The sight of those stars caused some embarrassment to me, because, I had forgotten them for such a long time. But during that night, as I looked towards them with my wet eyes, I noticed that all those old friends of my childhood had once again assembled over my head without any complaint. They had come only to share my pain and suffering. While we were children, each of us used to choose his favourite star. Kamran, Niggy, Ibad and I had our own selected stars. For myself I used to choose the most brilliant star, because since my childhood, I had been in the habit of selecting the rarest and most prominent things for myself. Same was the case with her who was unique and most prominent among all the girls. If my heart had expressed its desire for her, what was wrong with it? Why had the whole world turned against me? Why has the world always turned against the lovers? That whole

night was spent under the onslaught of several such questions and I suddenly realized the passage of the night when one after the other, my friends the stars started bidding farewell to me; and I began to hear the loud noise made by the little birds in their small nests in the pine, cherry and other trees. Perhaps, nests are also like our homes. First of all, older members of the family wake up and prepare breakfast for the children and then, the children are awakened from their sleep. Then, I heard the Azan from the hospital mosque and one after the other, worshippers were seen going towards the mosque. For a while, I went on observing these people who had sacrificed their early morning sleep and were rubbing their eyes and going towards the mosque full of religious fervour. Till then, I had never got up so early in the morning for going to the mosque in order to offer the Morning Prayer. I wondered what strange type of people they were. I was unable to understand the passion which was driving them towards the mosque. I had spent the whole night sleeplessly and now, rays of the sun had reached the ground after passing through the branches of tall trees. The hustle and bustle of life had begun. Perhaps, it was time for the visit of some senior doctor because, members of the hospital staff clad in white uniform were hurriedly removing the bench sleepers from the benches. I myself had no mind to stay there. I had to go to Shakir. He might have gone to the Maulvi's house the previous day and might have brought some fresh news for me. Quite unintentionally, I put my hand into the pocket and discovered the few hundred rupee notes which were in my pocket at the time when I was leaving my home. I got into a tonga standing near the hospital gate and told the tonga driver to take me to that part of the city where Shakir's house was situated. For the first time on that day I realized that if a person is sitting on the back seat of a tonga, the surrounding scenes appear to him like a movie being shown in twisted form.

Shakir who was coming out of the Haveli's gate, was stunned to see me there and ran towards me. For a while, he carefully surveyed me as if I had come from some other planet. "O Mr. Hammad, where did you go yesterday? Where did you spend the last night? What strange appearance you've made of yourself."

Accompanied by Shakir, I went to his quarter, because, I had refused to go to the drawingroom of the old Haveli. Shakir hurriedly opened the door of his quarter's drawingroom that opened into the backyard of the old Haveli. With my half shut eyes, I remained seated at the sofa for some time. After a short while, Nighat and Shakir entered the room with the breakfast tray. The breakfast which Nighat had hastily prepared consisted of Parathas, tea and a delicious dish made of boiled eggs. But at that time, I was in no mood of eating anything. However, on the insistence of Shakir, I had to drink a few draughts of tea. I was eager to know about his visit to the Maulvi's house. But before that, Shakir told me what had happened at my own house after my departure. At the time when I left my home, Shakir had gone to meet the Maulvi. Afterwards, when he went to my home, some other servants narrated to him the incident that had taken place there. According to Shakir, Mother was worried about me while Father and brother Sajjad were satisfied with the thought that I would soon return home after being driven from pillar to post. However, my younger brother Ibad had visited all of my friends during the night in search of me. I did not tell Shakir where I had spent the night. In response to all his questions, I asked him only one question. "Did you go to the Maulvi's house? What's the news from there?"

As he listened to my question, he remained silent for a while and then spoke. "Yes, I went there yesterday. Ever since his return from your house that day, the Maulvi has become a bed ridden fellow and his whole family seems to be in a state of mourning. In such a situation, I didn't think it appropriate to talk to him about anything else. I only enquired after his health and came back. The Maulvi has been completely shattered by the shocking incident that took place in your house. The only valuable asset for a gentleman is his sense of honour. But if someone deprives him of it, he finds himself buried alive."

I could very well imagine the hard times through which the Maulvi's family must have been passing at that time. Shakir had done the right thing by returning home without saying anything to

the Maulvi about me. There was no reason for me to remain sitting in Shakir's drawingroom and I, therefore, got up to leave.

Shakir caught my hand. "Where do you wish to go now? I won't let you go anywhere."

"I've got no destination now. I'll go wherever my legs carry me. I've got a splendid opportunity of recognizing myself and I don't want to lose it at any cost, otherwise, for the rest of my life, I won't be able to raise my head before anyone and even myself."

Shakir was well aware of my nature. Whenever I determined to do something, no power on earth could force me to reverse my decision. His eyes were full of tears because, he knew that I had spent my whole life in a bed of roses and that very soon, I would be fatally wounded by the thorns which I had deliberately opted for myself. But at the same time, he knew that he won't be able to stop me. He walked along me to the last end of the Haveli. As I looked around, I found Nighat standing beside the door. Her eyes were full of tears and with the corner of her head covering, she was wiping off those tears. I forcibly sent Shakir back to his home. After all, he had to go on his duty. The Commissioner had been extremely furious during the previous evening and I knew that he would vent out his fury on the servants. At last, with tearful eyes, Shakir went back.

After walking on the road for a while, I found a tonga and told the driver to take me to the railway station. I remembered that Kamran often talked to me about one of his distant relatives named Javed Siddiqi, who was serving as Station Master in the railway. He did not know me but I thought that he might still be serving at the same post at Quetta Railway Station. I had to do something to make both ends meet and that distant relative of Kamran might be of some help to me. Moreover, one sentence spoken by Maulvi Alimuddin during his last encounter with me, was continuously echoing in my ears.

Standing at the gate of my house, I was humbly apologizing to Maulvi Alimuddin and requesting him to prescribe for me whatever punishment he liked for the injustice that had been done to him by my family. In that situation, the Maulvi had said something which was absolutely true.

"You haven't got any identity of your own. Only those people who have their own identity, have the right to beg forgiveness and to be forgiven. As far as you are concerned, you are dependent on those who have made fun of my poverty and disgraced my innocent daughters."

Whatever he had said was a truth and I had felt his words like a slap on my face. He had rightly said that I had no right to apologize on behalf of the members of my family, because, I was totally dependent on them. In other words, till then, I had spent my whole life without any personal identity. Everyone knew me only as the son of Retired Commissioner Amjad Raza. Thus, whatever honour and respect I had in my life, had been gifted to me by someone else. But now, I was determined to have my own identity and with this new identity, I would once again face Maulvi Alimuddin. Having arrived at the railway station, I enquired about Javed Siddiqi. Luckily for me, he was still serving there at the same post. I stood for a while outside the station master's room and then gave to the peon a slip of paper bearing my name. A few minutes later, I was called inside the room. Mr. Javed Siddiqi was a white haired respectable looking man in his fifties with spectacles on his eyes and a ball point on an ear. He had a strong well-built body and was of medium height. His white hair had been properly parted from one side. Examining the files that lay before him, he looked towards me and said "So Mr. Hammad, you are Kamran's friend. What can I do for you?"

"Sir, I am unemployed these days. I shall be extremely thankful to you if you arrange some job for me, even if it is on temporary basis."

Mr. Siddiqi lifted his head in surprise and had a closer look at me.

"So that's the matter. I thought you've come here in connection with some seat reservation. But from your appearance you seem to be an educated boy. How can I find a suitable job for you here? What's your qualification?"

At times, the higher education of a man becomes an obstacle in his way. People have sympathy for him but feel shy while giving him some job. I had already decided not to tell anyone about my educational career and my family background.

“Sir, my qualification is barely nominal. You may give me any type of work to do. While coming here, I was very much hopeful that you would help me.”

Mr. Siddiqi had another scrutinizing look at me as if he did not believe in what I had said about my education. But he seemed to be an experienced man and did not have any further argumentation with me on this issue.

“Can you lift the luggage?”

“Yes sir.”

He rang the old hand bell lying on the table and his peon at once came into the room like the genie which appeared as soon as Aladdin rubbed his lamp on the ground.

“Summon Ghafura,” ordered Mr. Siddiqi.

The peon nodded his head and soon returned accompanied by a middle aged man having a strong and healthy body and wearing the uniform of the coolies consisting of a rope on the shoulder, a red shirt and an iron badge on the hand. Before entering the room, Ghafura switched off the light to indicate that he had a great respect for Mr. Siddiqi. As soon as he entered the room, he said Salaam (The actual words of Salaam are “Assalamu Alaikum” which means “May peace be upon you.” These are the words with which Muslims greet each other) to Mr. Siddiqi and stood respectfully in front of him.

Mr. Siddiqi again raised his head and said, “Is the number of your workers complete?”

“No sir. Sallu’s son who had pneumonia last month hasn’t yet joined his duty. Besides him, there are a couple of other corrupt workers who are always on leave. I’ve prepared their papers and tomorrow, you will get complaint against them.”

Later on, I came to know that Ghafura was the labour in charge of the dry port at the railway station. Mr. Siddiqi decided that I should work temporarily under Ghafura, because in order to work permanently as a coolie, I required departmental permission, which was a long process. However, Mr. Siddiqi was authorized to include my name in the list of temporary labourers or coolies who were working on daily wages.

“Ghafuray, this is Hammad. From today, he will work under you. For the time being, I’ve recruited him on temporary basis. After seeing his performance, we’ll decide whether to issue a permanent permit for him or not.”

In astonishment, Ghafura observed me from head to heels. Perhaps, there was something written on my face which was not allowing him and his boss to mentally accept me as a labourer. Perhaps, life long prosperity gives a particular shine to our face or writes something on it, which is hard to remove.

While I was about to go, Mr. Siddiqi told me that I could come to him at any time, in case I had some problem. I informed him that I was alone and had no place to live. He instructed Ghafura to tell the peons of the third class waiting-room that for the time being I would be sleeping there at night. Moreover, it was summer season and the nights could also be spent on the platform. First of all, Ghafura brought out my uniform from the store and gave it to me. The first number of my new identity was also allotted to me. It was Hammad labourer #137,. At that place, labourers were not called by their names but by their numbers. I was not Hammad. Instead, I had become labourer #137. In one sense, it was a good thing because, my actual name did not bear any semblance with the names of other labourers. If it had not been necessary to submit my identity card, I might have changed my name as well.

Every railway station has its own world, its own morning and evening. Till then, I had always traveled by air. My experience of travelling by trains was limited to London and other European cities. Inside my own country, I had not properly seen even a single railway station. But what an irony of fate it was that I was standing as a labourer at the railway station of my own city.

Unlike the ordinary coolies, the coolies of the dry port had no concern with the passenger trains. They were mainly required to unload the goods from goods trains. A short while ago on that day, a

goods train had arrived at platform 2. After the clarification of all the details, Ghafura patted me on my back and said, “Young man, start your labour now. God will help you.”

Like other labourers, I also began unloading the cargo. It was for the first time in my life that I understood the real meaning of weight and how the whole body pains while lifting heavy weight. I became exhausted only in two rounds. Ghafura who was keenly observing me, called me and as I went near him he smiled and said, “Why young man, it seems as if you’ve never lifted anything heavy in your life.”

“No, I’m not habitual of such things, but don’t worry, I’ll complete the work of my share.”

Ghafura held my hands, had a close look at my palms and said “Dear friend, Ghafura’s eyes can never tell a lie. These hands have been made for holding pens and papers. Why have you come here to spoil your youth? Go away from here otherwise, one day, your life will also be ruined like ours while lifting these heavy things. Have some mercy on your youthful beauty.

With a smile, I pulled back my hands and resumed my work. How could he know that all of my youthful beauty had already been burnt to ashes by the spark of the first glimpse of that charming lady? Now, only some faint smoke was rising from my heart as a last reminder of that fire. This smoke would also vanish as soon as this fire is over.

CHAPTER 15

SLEEP

For a long time, I lay tossing in my bed at night, thinking about the anti-Muslim slogans written on the blackboard. Without any genuine reason, people have associated sleep with the shutting of eyes. A person can remain awake throughout his life, with his eyes shut all the time. In the same way, there are a large number of people in the world who are always asleep while their eyes are open. Perhaps, the fact is that what we regard as sleep, is not sleep at all, because, sleep is related to the peace of our mind and heart, and not to the shutting of our eyes. It appeared to me as if for centuries, I had only been shutting my eyes, without ever being able to sleep.

The next morning, Kamran dropped me at the University. While we were in the parking, we saw Sarah coming out of her white Battle Car. Kamran was fully attentive towards her, who was looking extremely beautiful in her blue skirt and high necked white sweater. He whistled and said, "Medi dear, you never told me that such beauties also come to your university. When is your next semester going to start? Today, I'm very much ashamed of my ignorance."

"Don't try to be so smart. This is the same Jewess who is deadly against me and thus, there's no need for you to be so much interested in her. She's bitterly against the Muslims."

But Kamran remained defiant and acting in accordance with his old habit, he described her as similar to a famous Hollywood actress. He had always been in the habit of finding similarities in the facial features of smart people and well-known actors and actresses. Whenever he could find such a similarity, he started calling that person by the name of that actor or actress.

Kamran heaved a deep sigh and spoke "No problem my dear if she is a Jewess. Jews are also included among the People of the Book. She seems to me just like Salma Hike. Having hostilities with such a pretty girl is of no use. I withdraw my old suggestion and strongly recommend that you should have friendship with her."

With a great deal of difficulty, I sent him back. In the meantime, Sarah had also got down from the car and was busy talking to another student. While driving past her, Kamran tried to be as near as possible to Sarah but she did not take any particular notice of his action. As I was going forward carrying my bag, Sarah called me from behind.

"Mr. Hammad, wait a minute please."

As I halted, Sarah quickly came to me, properly arranging her untied hair which could be seen fluttering in the air.

"Rebecca gave me your message. Throughout my life, I've never felt the need for giving explanations of my actions to anyone. But at the same time, I've never allowed anyone to accuse me of something done by others. I didn't write all that on the blackboard. In fact, I've no need to write such things, because, I express my views quite openly and have the full courage to do so."

"Then how should I interpret your explanation? Are you advocating on behalf of your friends? Of course, it must have been done by one of them."

"No, I'm not advocating on behalf of anyone of them because, truth needs no advocates."

"But truth does require some solid arguments and proofs; and those who don't have these things vent out their fury and frustration by doing such childish things."

Sarah looked attentively towards me and spoke in a rather harsh tone. "I don't know about others but as far as I'm concerned, I've got thousands of arguments to support my viewpoint. But I don't want to waste my time as well as yours in explaining these arguments for proving the truth."

In reply, I informed her of my decision. "If one of us succeeds in convincing the other about his or her truth, the other one will follow his or her path. Do you agree?"

Sarah was startled and as she looked towards me, she saw the challenge hidden in my eyes. "I agree and I'll be extremely happy to defeat you."

"Only the coming time will decide it. Best of luck."

Sarah and I started walking in opposite directions. If someone could see us from a distance, he might have concluded that we were the two arrows shot from the same bow at the same time in two opposite directions.

On that day, members of Sarah's gang made a number of satirical remarks intended for me but I remained silent. Rebecca was a close friend of Sarah, but for some unknown reason, after that day, she started sitting with me on the same desk. Two students could sit on each of the desks placed in the classroom but since the beginning of the classes till that day, I used to sit alone on my desk. Apparently, Rebecca was a lively, energetic, noisy, vivacious and hilarious girl, always clad in jeans and jacket and always chewing gums. She was full of fun and activity and looked like a carefree butterfly. While walking, when she moved her boy cut hair, it was enough to quicken the heartbeats of all the young boys standing around her. But when she started sitting with me on the same desk, I realized that she had as much interest in her studies as in her frivolous and coquettish activities.

A boy named Jim, who was apparently a Jew, was the leader of Sarah's gang. Tina was another active member of their group. Thus, it was a gang of four, consisting of Sarah, Jim, David and Tina. In fact, the whole gang acted upon Sarah's instructions. One day, during the break, when Jim made some cartoons and wrote some funny sentences to amuse the students, I at once judged from his writing that it was he who had written those anti-Muslim sentences on the blackboard. However, after that day, no one attempted to write such words again on the blackboard. But I knew very well that the lava was boiling beneath this apparent calm. On the third day, it was announced that an inter-departmental speech competition was going to be held at the University and all the students who were interested in the competition were told to submit their names. Rebecca who was in a mischievous mood, raised my hand in the class, although at that time, I was busy writing something. This action of Rebecca was strongly disapproved by Sarah who glared at her angrily. Anyhow, my name had now been included in the list of speakers.

That day, the university's central hall was jam-packed with audience. The mayor of London had been specially invited on that occasion. In her black coat and scarf and with her neatly tied hair, Sarah looked like a school girl as she came on the stage to make her speech. She spoke forcefully in support of the Jewish claim that more than five million Jews were killed by the Nazis during the Second World War. This mass murder of the Jews is remembered as holocaust. She gave a number of arguments to prove this hypothesis. Till that time, I did not have much information about the holocaust and while Sarah was speaking, I was thinking of discussing this matter with Joseph, who had a considerable knowledge of the Jewish history. After Sarah, it was my turn to speak and as I walked towards the rostrum, silence prevailed in the hall. This silence was disrupted only by Rebecca's clapping. The topic given to me for the speech was "Inter-religion debate". After thanking Mr. president, I addressed the audience. Sir Isaac was sitting in the front row of the audience.

"Worthy audience, I believe that inter-religion dialogue is the greatest need of our time. No religion of the world allows its followers to show prejudice against the followers of other faiths. It is true that those who were at the height of their glory in the past, are now passing through a period of decline and degradation due to their own lapses and are being subjected to religious prejudice and isolation. There is a confrontational atmosphere between religion and science.

Why is it that in Physics, quantum theory is accepted as a reality while Prophet Muhammad's nocturnal trip to the heavens, which is the greatest evidence of the journey of light, is rejected? All the people are interested in the stories of time machines and travelling into the future. All such inventions are being eagerly anticipated. But why do such people refuse to believe the story of a person who travelled to the seven heavens with the speed of light and then returned safely to tell what he had seen and heard there? Those who drop atom bombs in their fanaticism of victory and superiority, are described as civilized people but those who had nothing in their hands but stones to defend their homes, are called terrorists. Why is it so? I want the answers to all such questions from the representatives of the new generation who are present here."

Charged with emotions, I continued to speak until at last, the stage secretary rang the bell to indicate that the allotted time of seven minutes had come to an end and I had to leave the rostrum. After expressing my thanks, I came down. For a moment, it appeared as if the entire hall had been spellbound. Then, Rebecca stood up and started clapping and gradually, she was joined by others. While standing on the stage and coming down, I had noticed that sir Isaac was absorbed in some deep thought. Feelings of calm and surprise were visible on Sarah's face and I realized that she knew the art of concealing her feelings.

At the end of the function, I came out of the hall and while I was passing through the corridor, Rebecca who was out of breath, came running to me from somewhere and warmly shook hands with me.

"Great Medi great! I had raised your hand in the class only casually, without knowing that you're an excellent speaker, in spite of the fact that you often remain quiet. Admit it or not, but the fact is that everyone in the hall was stunned by your speech. Listeners were compelled to believe whatever you were saying because, you had strong and solid arguments to prove the truth of your points."

With a smile, I acknowledged and appreciated the joy of that lively girl. "I don't know how and from where I got all these logical arguments. I've never been a particularly religious person. Moreover, I didn't make any preparation for the speech."

"I know that all the speakers were given their topics on the spot and they were required to speak extemporaneously. Anyway, you carried the day. Let's go to the cafeteria and have some hot coffee to celebrate the occasion."

It was Rebecca's habit that whenever she said something to someone, she went forward, without listening to the reply. I took a long breath and followed her because I knew that the time required for arguing with her would be much more than the time needed for gulping down a mug of coffee.

Apparently, the atmosphere was quite peaceful at the University but I did not know that in a few weeks time my speech would become the cause of many violent storms. Kamran had rightly said that I had come to the notice of the Jews, though I was quite unaware of it.

CHAPTER 16

GOD AND LOVE

I had been working as a labourer at the railway station for a week. Since my hands were not accustomed to such manual labour, there was a severe swelling in them on the very first night. But with the passage of time, the swelling began to disappear. Ghafura was taking care of me as much as possible. I remained at some distance from other labourers who had their own little joys and sorrows. They regarded me as an educated person and, therefore, they did not consider me to be one of them. As I seemed to be an educated young man, Ghafura used to call me Babu (The word Babu is generally used for smartly dressed educated modern young men).

I was spending my days working as a labourer at the railway station while my nights were being spent at the platform or on the benches of the waiting room. During those days, I had a strong realization that without any reason, we have turned our life into a great trouble for ourselves. If a person wishes, he can easily spend his life with two sets of clothes. I was Hammad Amjad Raza whose dresses were prepared in the finest boutiques of London. At times, I used to throw away the most precious dresses if they did not have proper cuff links or matching tie pins. If I wore a dress at one social gathering, I never liked to wear it again on some other occasion. But now, the same Hammad was quite comfortably spending his life in one uniform and one set of trousers and shirt. The uniform was officially washed every other day and in just five rupees, I could get my suit washed from the laundry of the railway station.

There was a time, when my breakfast remained incomplete without continental, English or Arabian ingredients. If at times, I did not find the French corn flax and Egyptian honey on the breakfast table, I would angrily leave the table without having breakfast. But now, my breakfast consisted of a cup of strong tea, bun and butter got from the cabin of the platform. Fresh strawberry shake was now replaced by sugarcane juice. Instead of having my lunch and dinner at five-star hotels, I used to go to the oven of the platform hotel for eating simple bread and broth. Quite surprisingly, after the first two or three days, I did not feel any particular difference in these things. In those days, I had a strong realization that human beings have put their life into unnecessary troubles and difficulties. This is especially the case with rich people like me. Our false pride, self-liking self-importance and self-esteem are nothing but a continuous torture for us.

In this process I also came to know how most people spend their days and nights. There are many people who spend 12 out of 24 hours of a day and night in sleeping. Out of the remaining 12 hours, six hours are devoted to the worldly worries such as those related to the office, business, trade and other forms of employment. From the remaining six hours, if we exclude two or three hours which we spend in eating or visiting our friends and relatives, it means that we hardly spend only two or three hours in 24 hours for ourselves. What is the need for so much tension, dishonesty and hectic struggle for the sake of only two or three hours? If a person starts running after higher status and higher standard of living, there can be no limit to such things. He may be spending a very comfortable and luxurious life but he will surely come across those people whose life is more comfortable and more luxurious than his own. But the fact is that from an emperor to a beggar, everyone has got only 24 hours at his disposal and the whole problem is how to pass these 24 hours? He may spend this time in the agonizing restlessness of having the best of the best, or in a state of contentment and patient resignation at whatever he has got in his life. He may spend the whole day in complaining or in expressing his gratitude to God. Whatever he does, time never stops and continues to pass.

Almost daily, life was teaching me new lessons or perhaps, I had started comprehending the realities of life; perhaps, life was not so difficult for me because I was alone. Perhaps, relations become the main compulsion and obstacle in a person's life. Demands of relations force him to become ungrateful and to join the race for getting best of the best. If everyone in the world had been alone, life might not have been so difficult and burdensome for him. Husband, wife, children, grand children and all other human relationships drive a person into a dangerous quagmire.

I had been working at the dry port of the railway station for a week. It was Thursday and I had an evening off. After informing Ghafura, I came out of the railway station. Throughout the previous week, I had not seen even a single glimpse of the outside world. As I came out of the station, I felt myself as a new-comer in the city. I told a tonga driver to take me to the old [locality of the city where Maulvi Alimuddin lived with his family. Daily, we take a number of decisions and make plans about future. We decide to do something or visit someone on a particular day or date. But at times, it so happens that when time draws near for implementing these decisions, we feel our heart sinking. Of course, such decisions are very few in number. But it was exactly the case with me while I was going towards the Maulvi's house. I was thinking that in my new life style, I might be able to beg forgiveness from the Maulvi; or at least, I might be in a position to make a humble request to forgive me.

At about five or five-thirty in the evening, the tonga dropped me at the gate of Maulvi Alimuddin's street. It was time for the Asr Prayer. With beating heart and heavy steps, I went up to the corner of the Maulvi's street but I no longer had the courage to go forward. The very idea of having another encounter with the Maulvi and once again entering the home of my sweetheart was enough for my whole body to perspire.

As my heart beat quickened, I stepped forward into the street which had only a few houses. The whole street looked deserted at that time of the evening. For a long time, I stood near the wooden door of the Maulvi's house, trying to keep myself calm and composed. I could hear a soft feminine voice coming from inside the house. My heart leaped and I thought that it was perhaps Iman's voice. I gently knocked at the door. After the second knock, I heard the sound of footsteps coming towards the door. Then, someone asked "Who's there?"

Of course, it was Iman's voice. How could I forget her soft melodious voice? For a moment, the earth and the sky seemed motionless. In reply, I wished to say something but due to my nervousness, I only made some incoherent sounds which forced Iman to ask my name again. By that time, Iman had come quite near to the door. Perhaps, all the visitors of the Maulvi strictly adhered to the etiquettes of knocking at the doors of others. Iman might be thinking that I was also one of those civilized people who stand at a distance of ten steps after knocking at the door and if they hear some feminine voice from inside, they turn away their face so that the ladies of the house may not have to look at a stranger's face. But how could an ignorant person like me know about such traditional etiquettes? It was for the first time in my life that I had knocked at someone's door in such a gentle manner. All of my friends, relatives and acquaintances had grand palace like residences. The gate keepers deployed at their gates always opened the gates before the blowing of the horn and my sports car speedily entered through the gate.

Perhaps, Iman was of the view that I was also one of those civilized guests of her father who were fully aware of all the etiquettes of knocking at the door. She might have concluded that after hearing a feminine voice from inside the house, I must have gone a few steps away and, therefore, my voice could not be properly heard by her in the house. Perhaps, due to this very reason, when she came to the door, she slightly opened it to ask my name through the slit. But I was still standing near the door unable to speak and move. First of all, I saw her delicate and conical fingers at the tip of the door. She had properly covered her face with her head cover. As she slightly opened the door, she was dumbfounded. She could not imagine someone standing so near to the door. In confusion, I lifted my eyes and for a moment, my eyes had an encounter with hers. Her eyes resembled the eyes of a female deer and during that fleeting moment, I noticed in her eyes the same intensity and surprise which I had never seen in anyone else's eyes. The very next moment, she turned back and went away. In her utter confusion and nervousness, she had not even properly shut the door. I was also trying to recover my senses after being struck by the lightning of her eyes. After a while, Haya appeared at the door. First of all, she properly shut the door and then said Salaam to me through the narrow opening of the door. After responding to her Salaam, I told her that I had come to meet the Maulvi. She informed me that he was not feeling well at that time and, therefore, it would not be possible for me to see him.

“You see, it is extremely important for me to meet him. I won’t take much of his time. I wish to talk to him only for a few moments. Please!”

In response, Haya remained silent but Iman, who had also arrived at the door, began to speak.

“For God’s sake, go away from here. With a great deal of difficulty, Father has been able to recover from that shock to some extent. If he sees you here, his condition may deteriorate again. I, therefore, request you not to come here again.”

I felt as if my heart had been stabbed or crushed under a heavy stone. But these innocent girls were not to blame for the matter. For the health of her noble father, every girl would give a similar suggestion. For a few moments, I was unable to say anything. Then, I mustered up my courage.

“You see, I can very well imagine the anguish and agony of his heart but believe you me, I didn’t have the least idea of what happened that day; otherwise, I would never have said anything about this matter to any member of my family. Anyhow, I was the cause of whatever happened that day and, therefore, it’s my responsibility to make amends for that. Please don’t deprive me of the opportunity to beg forgiveness from him. I implore you most humbly.”

“Such words are of no use now. Time itself will heal his wounds. But if you continue to appear before him again and again, he may never be able to forget this incident. I’ve no complaint to make against you. What is done cannot be undone and there is no use of crying over spilt milk now.”

Iman was justified in her arguments but these arguments would have been right for me if my only objective had been meeting the Maulvi for the last time and begging forgiveness from him. In that case, I could have waited for years till the healing of the Maulvi’s wounds, in order to beg forgiveness from him. But my objective was of a much higher nature. After winning back his confidence, I intended to get the rare emerald that lay hidden in his house, whose single look had changed my whole life. Clinging to the door, both the sisters were waiting for me to go, while standing outside the door, I was thinking of some other way to gain entry into the house. I had a feeling that if I returned unsuccessfully that day, I might never be able to come here again. But as soon as I summoned up my courage for the last time and attempted to speak, I heard the Maulvi’s voice coming from the veranda.

“Who’s there at the door?” he was asking his daughters.

A prolonged silence prevailed in the house but in the meantime, another thing happened. With a rosary in his hands, Abdullah entered the street from the corner. Seeing me standing at his door, he was startled for a moment. But the very next moment, he recovered himself, came forward and shook hands with me.

“You are here?”

“Yes. I’ve come here to see the Maulvi.”

“It may not be appropriate for you to meet him now.”

“Please go inside and tell him about my coming. If he refuses to see me, I’ll go back.”

After thinking something for a while, Abdullah nodded his head and then went in. Only my heart knows what an ordeal those few moments were for me. I felt as if after being condemned to death, I was standing on the scaffold waiting for the relatives of the murdered person to decide whether they would forgive me or order the executioner to pull the lever and bring an end to my life.

I stood there waiting, as if for centuries. Finally, Abdullah came out and I looked towards him with hopeful eyes. He moved away from the door and said, “Come in please.”

My breathing became regular once again and with my head bent, I followed Abdullah and entered the house where she lived. Passing through the courtyard, we walked towards the drawingroom situated on the other side of the wooden grills adjacent to the veranda. As I sat down in the drawingroom, Abdullah went out and there was complete silence for the next few moments without any sound or movement. As I looked around, I noticed that all the things in the room were lying in the same order in which I had seen them during my first visit. But what a hell of difference between the reception which I received during my first visit and which was now being given to me. So often, even the fortunes of the greatest men are turned upside down in a minute by time. After a short

while, I heard the low coughing of the Maulvi at the door. I immediately sat down in an upright manner.

Walking with the support of a stick, the Maulvi entered the room. It looked as if he had been sick for years. I stood up as a mark of respect for him, while he silently sat down on the sofa in front of me and responded to my Salaam in a low voice.

For a while, complete silence prevailed in the room. I felt as if I had lost all my words and the Maulvi too sat without saying a word. At last, I broke the ice.

“How do you feel now?”

“I feel better now. Thanks be to Allah.”

“Can I hope to be forgiven by you today?”

“Why to mention the past happenings again and again? Who am I to forgive the people? Allah alone has the power to forgive the human beings. I have forgotten everything. You should also forget it. Such things are not worth remembering for the high class people. Leave the low class people like us to our fate.”

Gradually, his tone was becoming quite bitter. It was his greatness that he was tolerating my presence in his house. Had it been someone else, I might have been driven away from the door.

“I admit that whatever was done by the members of my family was a mean and deplorable act and a sin that cannot be compensated; but why are you annoyed with everyone?”

The Maulvi’s tone became bitterer.

“Forget these things young man. All these things are the pastimes and routine enjoyments of aristocratic people like you. Poor people like us have got only a few precious things such as honour and self-respect, but you people rob us of these things as well.”

“Do you believe that my worst crime is that I’m the son of a rich father, born in a rich family? Is the richness of a person such a cardinal sin that no one should ever trust his good intentions? Please let me know through what type of test or trial shall I have to pass in order to prove my truth? I’m ready to do whatever you like to regain your trust and confidence. You are annoyed with my affluence. But this affluence is not my own. It has been given to me by others. On that day, you said that I haven’t got my own identity. If it is the case, why are you punishing me for the identity given to me by others?”

I became a bit emotional and said whatever came to my mind. With his bent head, the Maulvi sat silently for a while, perhaps contemplating on what I had just said. Then, he lifted his head and spoke.

“If you are earnestly desirous of forgiveness and if you wish that the burden of what was said by the members of your family should be removed from my heart, you’ll have to make a promise with me. From today, you’ll have to forget forever, the way leading to this house, this house itself and the people living in it, for the sake of their honour and dignity. I’ve cool-mindedly listened to your words and accepted your apology. Now, you too will have to prove that you are really ashamed of the behaviour of your family. Can you make this commitment with me? Do you wish to win back your old trust?”

For a while, I could not think of an appropriate answer. I felt that during the previous week, Shakir must have told something to the Maulvi about my wish, that is why, he had to make such a long preliminary statement before coming to the point. In other words, he knew that besides begging forgiveness, I had another far more important objective. I again mustered up my courage.

“You see, on that day, you had said that I don’t have my own identity and that, whatever I am, it is due to my dependence on others and due to their power and prestige. The very next day, I left that house and today, I’ve come to you with my own separate identity. Now, I’ve nothing to do with the wealth, power and splendour of that house. Currently, I’m working as an ordinary labourer. I’m an educated man and can easily earn my bread and butter. I can give you every guarantee even some others can give you this guarantee which will be entirely based on my own personality. My past

identity will have no role to play in it and on the basis of my new identity, I wish to make a request to you.”

Signs of anger appeared on the Maulvi’s face but with a great deal of difficulty, he controlled himself and began to speak.

“Before repeating something, keep it in your mind that I’ve still got some honour and respect which may be shattered by your request. Whatever you are thinking is totally impossible.”

While going towards the Maulvi’s house from the railway station, I had not thought even for a single moment that I would have to say the final word in this connection that very evening, but the decisive tone of the Maulvi’s words was indicating beyond any doubt that he wanted to settle the matter then and there. For a moment, both of us remained silent but at last, I broke the silence.

“I had thought of sending some elderly person for the final settlement of this issue. Besides the members of my family, there are some other people as well, who could convey my request to you. But it seems that you have already made the final decision. Please tell me what is lacking in me? I’ve already thrown away the disdainful mark of my wealth and affluence. In addition to this, if I’ve got some other short coming or flaw, I’ll definitely try to remove it. At least, there must be some reason for rejecting me in such a manner.”

The Maulvi was no longer in control of himself. He angrily stood up and shouted,

“That’s enough! Stop it now! Why are you bent upon defaming us? What would the people say? They would say that Maulvi Alim married his daughter into the same house where he used to go for teaching a child. The whole world would point fingers at us. Do you wish that with our own actions, we should prove the truth of the accusations which were brought against me and my daughters by the members of your family? No my dear no. Have some mercy on us.”

“It means that you are only afraid of what others would say. But suppose, if instead of misbehaving with you, the members of my family had come to your with this marriage proposal, for the sake of my happiness, would you have accepted it?”

“No, never. We are no match for you. You’ve been trained and brought up in an entirely different environment. What you describe as love is regarded by us as a sin. I’m already a sinful man. Don’t make me more sinful. Our daughters are not married into those families whose members have not offered their prayers for years. These are the families whose youngsters hardly know about the first and second Kalimas (A Kalima is a holy sentence taught by the Holy Prophet to his followers, to be repeated by them for receiving Allah’s blessings. There are six such Kalimas or holy sentences which are generally taught to the Muslims in their childhood) and are quite ignorant of the remaining four Kalimas. In such families, the Quran is only considered to be a book which should be placed in a decorative manner in the shelf. You have also been trained in a similar family where men and women openly mix up with each other. If a person leaves his house, it doesn’t mean that his mentality has changed or that the effects of his training have disappeared from his personality. I don’t want to destroy my future generations. It’s time for my Prayer, let me go.”

He angrily left the room without hearing my reply. After his departure, Abdullah entered the room, carrying the tea tray. I told him that I wanted to go but he hurriedly poured some tea into a cup for me. With an unwilling heart, I had a few draughts of tea. As I came out of the house, Abdullah also came with me, into the street to say good-bye. At last, he shook hands with me and spoke:

“Please don’t mind the words of my uncle, because, at that time, he was a bit out of control. For this very reason, I had told you that it would be better not to meet him in this condition. Anyhow, whatever happened, forget it. The other day, I was told by Uncle Shakir that you’ve left your home. I advise you to return home. Parents have a very high place in our religion and it’s not good to remain annoyed with them for such a long time.”

I could hear the Azans for the Maghrib Prayer. After bidding farewell to me outside his street, Abdullah went towards the mosque but violent storms were blowing in my mind and I could not even properly say good-bye to him. I did not know where I was going at that time. The Maulvi’s words were piercing into my ears like molten lead. Is love really a sin? If love is a sin, why was it

giving me joy and peace instead of restlessness? I believed that the class difference was the main cause of the Maulvi's refusal. But the actual situation turned out to be quite different. Religion and love were at war with each other and love was being kicked away by religion. I was thinking that if I had learnt the six Kalimas by heart, worn religious dress and requested the Maulvi to allow me to marry his daughter, why should I have become acceptable to him in that case? If I was a bit away from religion, was it my own fault? My love for Iman was still intact and was as pure as that love which has the element of religion in it. It is true that on account of my upbringing and training, I had not been able to become a particularly good Muslim. But what was its connection with my love? I was still engrossed in such thoughts when I arrived back at the railway station. It was night time and the night mail had also gone. Like my heart, the platform looked deserted and desolate. A few cabins were still open. I silently went towards a bench and sat there. I had never thought that my distance from religion would one day make me and my love so inferior. I was considering myself to be a very humble and low person. The Maulvi's words had snatched away from me the pride of my love. In the ominous silence of the night I felt myself to be the loneliest person in the world.

CHAPTER 17

THREE PHASES OF LOVE

My speech at the University had made me quite popular among the students. It is said that if a person is controversial it is a great sign of his popularity. It was yet to be decided whether I was more popular or more controversial.

On the next day, during the Humaneering class, sir Isaac invited us to express our views about love. Rebecca was of the opinion that love is like a bottle of Fanta which we should continue to drink till the very end of the bottle. Jim remarked that love is a body which must be attained to quench the thirst. Tina was of the view that love is like the clothes hanging in the wardrobe. One wishes to wear new and different clothes daily. According to Sarah, love is nothing but the other name of the change of hormones in the body. This change is non-permanent. When hormones return to their old permanent place, love is gone.

Some naughty fellow sitting at the back benches remarked that by the time, the hormones return to their original place, the two lovers have got married. On hearing this comment, the whole class burst into laughters.

Then sir Isaac looked towards me.

“Mr. Hammad, what’s your viewpoint about love?”

“I believe that love descends upon man like the different phases of a day.”

“Oh really? Would you like to describe these different phases of love to the whole class?”

“The first phase of love always brings pain, suffering and severe thirst. This is the time when your beloved is away from you and your feelings are confined to you. The agony of one-sided love creates in you the feeling that you are walking on a path full of thorns. Then comes the expression of love and if luckily, this expression is crowned with acceptance; it marks the beginning of the second phase of love. In this stage, love brings calm and peace and appears like a tall shady tree. Even the scorching heat seems cool and the arid desert is transformed into an oasis. The stagnant water of this oasis looks like sweet fresh water, gushing forth from the fountains.

“Suddenly, I heard Rebecca’s voice from far away, although she was sitting beside me.

“What happens in the third phase of love?”

“There are only a few fortunate people who successfully pass through the first two phases of love and enter the third and final phase. The sense of pain, suffering and thirst in this phase of love is much more severe and intense than that of the first phase. But this thirst is the thirst of achievement.”

“The thirst of achievement? What type of thirst is it?” asked Sarah quite spontaneously; though later on, she must have regretted at her question.

“Yes, it is the thirst of achievement. When the river of the water of eternal life is flowing in front of you, would you like to drink only a drop or two? Of course not. The thirst of achievement is much more intense than the thirst of separation and if someone has got this type of thirst, meetings become more painful than partings. But alas, our limited life does not allow us to fully satisfy ourselves with this river. We can hardly gulp down a few draughts, when it is time to go.”

Silence prevailed in the whole class but perhaps, Jim did not like the attentive manner in which all the students were listening to me. In order to diffuse the impact of my words, he spoke in a taunting manner:

“Very fine. But also tell us about the final outcome after passing through this third phase of love”

“With a smile, I looked towards Jim and said,”The final outcome or end of love is no more different from the end of the three phases of a day. At the end of each day, there comes the evening and same is the case with love. It too has its evening after the passage of its three phases. It is a calm, quiet and beautiful evening.”

The rapturous applause and banging of desks made a huge noise. The most excited among all was Rebecca. Sarah was silently looking towards me.

Previously, there had been a strange type of distance between me and the rest of the students. But this incident changed the whole atmosphere for me. From now onwards, all the boys and girls began

welcoming me in the morning and bidding farewell to me in the afternoon, in a very warm and cheerful manner, exactly as they had been doing it among themselves. Kamran was extremely delighted at this achievement of mine. One evening, to celebrate the occasion, he took me to a large cinema hall in Central London. The building had several halls and a different movie was being shown in each hall. It was a cowboy type of movie and to make the matters worse, Kamran continued his running commentary throughout the show. He had already scene the movie ten times and had learnt by heart all its dialogues. Before the start of each scene, he thought it to be his duty to tell me its complete summary. At last, I became fed up with his behaviour, I threatened to go out of the cinema; and this made him silent. But by that time, the movie had ended. Since his childhood, he had been behaving in the same manner. At times, while we were in school, we used to slip away from the classes to see the morning show at the famous Regal Cinema of Quetta. But on each such occasion, as soon as we entered the cinema, we came to know that Mr. Kamran had already seen that movie about the great deeds of Tarzan or Sindbad. We then used to realize that he had come to the cinema only with the intention of boring all of us who had slipped away from the school. At last, we found a solution to the problem. While going to the cinema, we started taking with us a large, white coloured roll of surgical tape. It was made of cloth and as soon as Kamran began chattering, we would at once wrap the whole roll of the tape on his mouth.

While we were going back home from the cinema that night, we recalled those pleasant memories associated with the good old days of our childhood and laughed heartily. The snow removing machine had gathered small heaps of snow on the road sides. A faint smoke could be seen rising out of these heaps of snow. A few cars could be seen raising steam on the wet shining roads. Clinging together, arms in arms, the couples who had just come out of the cinema after watching the late night show were whispering romantically to each other, while walking on the footpath on their way back home.

In the meantime, a car crossed us and then halted at some distance ahead of us. The very next moment, it turned back and stopped near us. From inside the car, Rebecca showed her head and warmly waved her hand.

“Hi Medi, what a strange coincidence! Come on, do join us.”

Inside the car, besides Rebecca, another two class fellows of mine were also sitting. One of them was Rebecca’s cousin. It was something that I did not previously know.

“Thank you Rebecca. But today, we’re in the mood of walking on foot. Kamran glared angrily and nudged me. Rejecting any offer of a beautiful girl was something that could not be found in Kamran’s dictionary. Moreover, Rebecca continued to insist and we had to get into the car. Rebecca’s cousin stopped the car near an open air road side restaurant at some distance. At the back of the restaurant, there flowed river Thames and one could see the reflection of its sparkling water and hear the sound of its flowing. They ordered the coffee while Kamran started informing Rebecca and my other two classes about palmistry and about the mysteries hidden in the lines on the palms of hands. I knew very well that he was looking at the hands of the boys in the hope that afterwards, he would get a chance to hold the girl’s hand. It was his old trick and on several occasions, he had been highly successful in it. With a great deal of concentration, both the boys were showing their hands to him while I went towards an iron fence at the last end of the cement floor. Across the fence, there was a vast depth stretching far away. Standing there, I could see the steamers and small ships passing from under the bridge on river Thames. At that hour of the night, they were shining like fireflies. For a long time, I stood there watching the reflection of these shining lights in the flowing water. When I turned back, I found Rebecca looking attentively towards me.

“Why is it that whenever I meet you, I feel that I’m meeting a new man?”

“The fact is that every human being is wrapped up in several layers like an onion. The more you peel, the more layers you discover. Now, it’s up to the peeler to discover as many layers as he can.”

“No, discovering you is much more difficult than discovering an ordinary human being. That day, while you were describing different phases of love, I felt as if I had come to know of love for the first

time in my life. In fact, since that day, the whole class has been thinking about these new aspects of love. You have shown a new face of love to all of us.”

“The face is not new. Previously, it had only remained somewhat hidden from your eyes. Love is an idea or theory and all of us watch it through our own spectacles.”

She was keenly observing me. “Have you ever loved someone?”
Then, she herself discarded her own question.

“No no. It’s quite useless to ask such a question from you. The person who has such a deep understanding of love, must have passed through this experience. Tell me, how did you feel about love?”

“Love proved to me like the rusted guillotine which cuts off the head placed under it, but does not completely detach it from the body. The body continues to writhe and twist in pain and the person dies after undergoing immense agony and suffering. But by the time he dies, the nearby walls are smeared with his blood as a mark of love.”

Rebecca shut her eyes. “Oh Medi, such a painful and agonizing love? But how have you been able to remain alive after all that?”

“If you really love someone, why to be afraid of the agony, miss Rebi?”

With a smile, I called her by the name which was used by the whole class for calling her. For a while, Rebecca looked attentively towards me and then spoke:

“Didn’t I say that every dimension of your personality is new? Do you know why I annoyed all my old friends including Sarah and started sitting with you on the same desk?”

I looked towards her inquisitively.

“I had been watching you for a long time that morning when those absurd slogans were written on the blackboard I observed how you remained calm and composed while accepting the challenge. I saw a solid determination in your eyes. This determination is visible only on the faces of those who have the courage to take a firm stand against the whole world. Since childhood, I have been inspired by dashing, daring and determined people. I found you quite different from the rest of the students, and therefore, I decided to sit with you. Every passing day is proving that I had made the right choice.”

In the meantime, Kamran who had been making bad faces while watching me and Rebecca standing together for a long time, lost his patience and started calling us loudly. It appeared as if Rebecca wanted to say something else but we had to cut short our discussion and walk towards the table in order to have our coffee before it might cool down.

CHAPTER 18

LOVE AND GOD

The whole inside of mine had been shocked and jolted by what the Maulvi had said that evening. Previously, I had thought that I had obtained the identity which I needed for achieving my love, but on that day, I came to know that I had lost even my previous identity.

In the meantime, I continued to pay occasional visits to the old Haveli, in order to meet Shakir, who used to inform me of what was going on at my home which I had left. Perhaps, the members of my family had reconciled themselves to the idea of my absence. The thought of the rebels must be removed from the minds and hearts of other people as soon as possible, otherwise, their rebellious germs may start infecting them. No one could know this fact better than the Commissioner. He, therefore, banned even the mentioning of my name in the house. He believed that I must have gone to Kamran in London. I had left my home a month ago and since then, no one there had got any information about my whereabouts. Quetta was not a large city and thus, I could not stay with a friend in that city for such a long time, without the knowledge of my family. Ibad had gone in search of me to each and every friend of mine but in vain. He too might have concluded that I must have left the city and gone somewhere else. No member of my family could have imagined that for the last four weeks, I had been working as a labourer at the railway station of the same city.

Once, I had a meeting with Nighat at Shakir's house, but I could not ask her anything. One day, While I was about to go back from Shakir's house, finding me alone, she called me from behind. As I stopped, she silently came to me, stood there for a while and then, all of a sudden, burst into tears.

"Brother, I can't see your miserable and pathetic condition. Love has virtually ruined you. The fault is mine. If I had not arranged your meeting with her, the whole thing would never----" She was choking with emotions and was unable to complete her sentence. My eyes were also filled with tears, but with a great deal of difficulty, I controlled myself, because, I knew that if at that time, I had started weeping, she would have started crying at the top of her voice as a child. I affectionately placed my hand on her head and patted her.

"Niggy, should I tell you something?"

Niggy eagerly looked towards me.

"Yes."

"As was the case in your childhood, you still look very ugly while weeping."

For a while, she looked towards me in surprise, but when she understood my trick of stopping her weeping, she smiled. Then, she told me that after my meeting with the Maulvi, she had gone to his house twice in order to meet Iman. According to her, the Maulvi was feeling much better now. She informed me that she had told Iman about my leaving the family and about my present wretched condition. As she was narrating the whole story Iman remained silent and as usual, went on scratching the carpet on the floor with the nails of her feet. However, Haya could not control herself and she began to weep. The only thing which Iman said to Nighat was that she should ask me to give up my obstinacy and go back home. Thus, after centuries, she sent me a message consisting of a few words. But those few words were also a source of consolation for me. At least, she had remembered me and said something about me. With tears in her eyes, Nighat touched my hands full of swelling. I had to tell her that I was working as a coolie at the railway station. But at the same time, I got a solemn promise from her that she would not tell it to any member of her or my family. Shakir had never tried to go after me to know where I lived, because, he knew that I myself would tell him everything at some appropriate time.

From my pocket, I brought out two pearls which had till then been reminding me of Iman's presence even in her absence. They were the same pearls which I had found after my meeting with Iman in the study of the old Haveli. Since then, it had become my routine that whenever I felt terribly sad, lonely and exhausted or whenever I remembered her very much, after a whole day's manual labour, I would fall down on some hard easy chair in the waiting room, shut my eyes and place the pearls on my eyes. Within no time, I could feel their cool and refreshing sensation, passing

through my shut eyes and penetrating into my soul. Then, I would imagine that Iman had come to me with her downcast and confused looks. Then, for hours and hours, we would talk together and spend the whole night in this dreamful atmosphere.

Imagination and dreams are some of the greatest blessings of God. If they are snatched away from man, he will not be able to survive for a long time. He will be strangled to death by the suffocation of desires. We fulfil ninety per cent of our desires through dreams and imagination.

Nighat looked at the two pearls in surprise and I narrated to him the whole story of these precious and rare gems. As I put the pearls on her palm I said,

“Return these pearls to her and tell her that if fortune favours me, one day, she herself would give them back to me. Currently, I’m fighting not against the world but against destiny. Let’s see who wins this battle.”

Nighat’s eyes were still filled with tears. I left her standing there and came out.

There come some moments in our life when we do not wish to see or talk to anyone. These are the moments when we even dislike talking to ourselves in our quiet loneliness. And only require perfect calm and peace and wish to go to that corner of the world where there is no one to see us, talk to us or ask questions from us.

A similar condition prevailed on me that day, as I returned to the railway station after meeting Nighat. It was Friday. Quetta Express had just left the station and the rush of people there, was gradually decreasing. Sitting silently on a wooden bench under a mulberry tree at one end of the platform, I was carefully looking at the words “Western Railway” engraved on its old board. I was thinking that the things present around us must have seen the passage of several months and years; and must have witnessed all sorts of good and bad times. For instance, the wooden bench on which I was sitting, had been present at the same place for the last hundred years since the days of the British rule over India. It must have passed through numerous storms, summers, winters, rains and springs. On many occasions, along with other old things present around it, it must have made fun of humble people like me who sit on it and make boastful remarks and loud claims. It is absolutely true that man who often behaves in a proud and arrogant manner, is an utterly insignificant creature and does not know that he may perish at the very next moment. While I was pre-occupied with all such thoughts, I was startled when I heard someone clearing his throat quite near me. As I turned around, I saw a bright faced old man standing there and watching me quite attentively. Perhaps, he had just come there after performing ablution at a nearby tap. As I looked towards him, he smiled and began to speak.

“I’m sorry gentleman. Perhaps, you were absorbed in some deep thoughts and I’ve disturbed you.”

To be honest, I was offended at his unnecessary interference but keeping in view his old age, I thought it better not to express my resentment. We the human beings are bound in numerous chains of traditions and customs. At times, it even seems difficult to breathe freely.

“Yes sir. What can I do for you?”

The old man smiled. “No my dear, I don’t want you to do anything for me. I only wanted to remind you that it’s almost time for the Friday Prayer and if you wish to make some preparation for it, hurry up.”

“Thank you very much. You go to the mosque please and I’ll be coming soon. The mosque is towards this side.”

I wanted to get rid of him but he turned out to be a stubborn old man.

“My dear, it’s not appropriate to show someone the way to the mosque in such a manner. You should take the traveler with you to the very door of the mosque.”

I was outraged but I again controlled myself.

“I’m sorry. I would surely have gone with you to the mosque. But at the moment, I’m thinking about some serious problems of my life. Please go to the mosque with someone else. I again apologize to you.”

“No problem my dear,” said the old man with a smiling face and added, “I’ll go to the mosque myself. But if you don’t mind, may I relax here on the same bench for sometime. The Friday Sermon is to start in about half an hour’s time.”

For a moment I thought to tell him quite frankly that the whole platform was empty and if he was so much interested in relaxing, he could go to some other bench. But then I thought that like me, he might also be a victim of loneliness and, therefore, if I allowed him to sit with me for sometime, it would do no harm to me. As far as I and my loneliness were concerned, we were age-old companions, perhaps, destined to remain together forever; and we could meet at any other time.

I moved towards one side and created some room on the bench for him to sit. Wiping his hands and face with a sheet of cloth on his shoulders, the old man sat down beside me on the bench.

“My Name is Rehmatullah. I’m going to Lahore where I live. I’ve to come here for a week or so, once in two or three months in connection with some press and publication work.”

“Then he stopped and looked towards me hoping that now, I would give my own introduction.

In just one sentence, I introduced myself to him. “My name is Hammad and I’m working here as a coolie.”

“God bless you. Hardwork is a glorious virtue. I’m sorry to have disturbed you in your solitude. But the fact is that I was watching you sitting here for a long time. A particular shine on your forehead compelled me to talk to you.”

“What you describe as a particular shine on my forehead is actually the darkness of my fate. When darkness or blackness goes beyond certain limits, it also develops in itself a particular type of shine.”

The old man kept watching me in astonishment. “Glory be to Allah. What a wonderful thing you have said. The shine of darkness, wonderful. You seem to be an educated fellow.”

“I’ve blackened some pages. But everything has gone waste.”

“Knowledge never goes waste. I think you are not particularly interested in Prayers.”

“I believe that it’s a matter of the heart. Sometimes, when my heart wishes, I offer my Prayers, otherwise, I don’t do so.”

“My dear, the fact is that I offer Prayers only to record my attendance, while my heart is absorbed in some other worldly problems.”

“Then, what’s the use of such an attendance? Isn’t My absence better than it?”

“Attendance is a must; otherwise, you won’t be allowed to sit for the next examination. You know very well that you are permitted to sit in the examination hall on the basis of your attendance. The examiner will call you for the examination, only if your attendance is complete, to a certain extent. Otherwise, you would be failed without examination. I believe that if somehow or the other, I succeed in gaining entry to the examination of the world hereafter on the basis of my half-hearted attendance in this world, I would humbly request the Grand Examiner to award me at least 33 pass marks. It doesn’t matter, if I fail in one or two subjects, in one way or the other, I’ll get through the over all examination. But for this purpose, attendance is the most essential pre-requisite, whether this attendance is perfect or imperfect, sincere or hypocritical. But this attendance alone will enable me to present myself for the next examination. If attendance is short, there will be no chance for me to appear before the examiner; and without a chance of appearance in the examination, the whole game will be lost.”

Filled with amazement, I continued to hear Rehmatullah’s speech. In a few and simple words, he had revealed a great truth. It is true that even the most incompetent, dullest and naughtiest students are given the opportunity to sit for the examination, if their attendance sheet is complete according to the prescribed standards of the examination. As far as their failure or success in the examination is concerned, it depends upon their fate and their performance. Moreover, the examiner may show leniency or mercy to him and award them 33 marks. But if the attendance sheet of a student is incomplete, he is considered to be one of the failed students without his appearance in the examination.

“You’re right. Seen in this context, attendance is really essential.”

Rehmatullah smiled to hear my words and spoke again. "Attendance in the Prayers is not something easy. Attending the five daily Prayers is extremely difficult, especially in the beginning when you are not habitual of it. Same was the case with me in the beginning. Somehow or the other, I managed to stand on the Prayer Mat but as soon as I would start the Prayer, I was obsessed with a strange type of restlessness and hurry and I used to have the feeling that in case I didn't immediately cut short my Prayer, I would lose millions of rupees. In those early days, I used to finish off all the Prayers in the same hasty and haphazard manner. At times, I even wrapped up the Prayers without bothering to think whether I had completed them or not. Quite interestingly, the moment I would finish the Prayer, all the hurry and scurry was gone. It appeared to me that the whole restlessness and hastiness that had caused such a massive stir in my blood, had only been due to the Prayer, because, after the completion of the Prayer, I could sit at the same place for several hours, without having any sensation of haste or impatience. However, as soon as I would again stand up for the next Prayer, the same process marked by hurry and flurry was repeated again. Even while offering the Prayers, my mind was completely pre-occupied with the thoughts of some woman, business or some other worldly pursuit. At times, my heart used to beat so violently during the Prayer that I had the feeling that if I continued the Prayer for a few more moments, my heart would leap out of my mouth."

With an increasing sense of wonder, I was constantly looking towards him. Generally, people do not disclose such personal things to others, for fear that they may be doubtful of their religion. But this old man was joyfully narrating the tale of his sincere as well as hypocritical Prayers.

"Let me tell you another very interesting thing. The mosque where I used to offer my Prayers had a front window that opened towards outside where there was a bazaar. If on certain occasions, I was fortunate enough to join the first row of worshippers, my eyes kept wandering in the bazaar outside the mosque throughout the Prayer. As a matter of fact, offering the Prayers was a tiresome and boring affair for me and quite unconsciously, my eyes often crossed the window into the street. To tell you the truth, this window proved to be of great help to me during the month of Ramadan. Whenever my friends forced me to attend the exceptionally long Taravi Prayers at night, I could easily spend the whole time looking outside the window."

Mr. Rehmatullah was smiling while telling this story and I too began to smile with him. With a great deal of curiosity, I looked towards him. "And what about now? What do you feel now?"

"With the passage of time, some sort of calm seems to be descending on my Prayers. But what to say of the Prayers offered by the people like me. I don't believe that they are of any particular worth or value because, It takes a lot of time to attain perfection, especially in religious matters. One man in several million is able to acquire this prestigious status. people like me manage to cross this river only by dint of their good intentions. Sometimes, the earnest prayers of somebody also prove helpful to us and we are able to reach some milestone, if not the final destination, because, there are only a few fortunate people who get to the final destination. When we people set out on our journey, we only have in our minds the idea of reaching the first milestone and even in this connection, we are not sure whether we would be able to reach this first milestone or not."

I was listening to Mr. Rehmatullah's words with full attention and interest. Till then, I had regarded religion as something extremely difficult, but it was quite evident from his words that it was a much easier and simpler affair which was mainly dependent on good intentions. In the meantime, the Azan for the Friday Prayer began and quite unintentionally, I accompanied Mr. Rehmatullah to the gate of the mosque. Although he did not ask me to join him in the Prayer, yet it did not seem appropriate to return from the gate of the mosque without offering the Prayer. Like other people present in the mosque, I too performed ablution and stood up for the Prayer. It was perhaps the first prostration of my life which I had performed without any fear, external pressure, hurry, indifference or some selfish worldly motive.

It was the first day of my life when I did not have any feeling of fear for religion and this first prostration of my life was full of calm, peace and tranquility.

The mosque was adjacent to the station and after the Prayer, I stood outside the mosque waiting for Rehmatullah. Soon, he also came out and we returned to the platform where it was being announced on the loud speaker that due to some technical problem, the Lahore bound train was three hours late. Rehmatullah smiled. "Perhaps God wants us to remain together for some more time. If you don't mind, may I sit here with you on your favourite bench and wait for the train?"

I was a bit ashamed. Perhaps, he still remembered my way of talking and my behaviour with him before the Prayer. I apologized to him for my earlier behaviour but he smiled.

"Why to apologize my dear? Everyone has full right to enjoy his privacy. It is I who should apologize. Anyhow, leave this topic, because, at the moment, I'm terribly hungry. Let's eat something."

He brought out a small iron Tiffin box from his luggage and despite my repeated refusal, forced me to join him in his simple lunch consisting of potatoes, pickles and Parathas. Quite eagerly, he had his lunch, drank water and thanked God. As he saw me eating without any particular interest, he gave me some advice.

"However busy you may be, you must spare some time for eating. The fact is that the whole struggle of our life is for the sake of our regular meals. Had there been no question of eating, most people would have spent much of their time worshipping in the mosques. But we have been ordered to explore our means of sustenance. You may take only a few morsels of food, but whatever you eat, eat it sincerely as an act of worship, so that after eating, you may be able to thank God. This act of thanksgiving should not merely be confined to food. While using each and every blessing of God, consider it to be another opportunity of thanking God which He Himself has provided you."

The words of that bright faced old man were a source of great surprise for me. I had never thought of this particular approach throughout my life. I always believed that my food, means of conveyance and all other comforts and luxuries of life were the outcome of the hardwork of my elders and I, therefore, had the full right to enjoy them and benefit from them. I had never considered such things to be the blessings of God, nor had I ever thought of expressing my gratitude to God for His blessings and gifts.

"Are you a preacher?" I asked him.

He laughed loudly and said, "It means whatever I have said to you so far, is regarded by you as preaching. How strange it is. How can I become a preacher when I cannot remain hungry even for a few hours? In order to become a real preacher, you must have full control over your desires, only then, you get the right of preaching and teaching something to others. Furthermore, first of all, a preacher must himself act upon what he tells others to do; and you know it is not something so easy."

Meanwhile, it was almost time for Mr. Rehmatullah's train to leave. The train had arrived at the platform and its siren was also being sounded intermittently. I assisted him in gathering his things and then picked up his suitcase, although he repeatedly told me not to do so. In order to bid farewell to him, I accompanied him to the compartment of the train. When he sat down on a seat near the window, I got down from the train and stood outside the window. As the train started with a jerking motion, he showed his head out from the window and gave the farewell kiss on my forehead.

"I feel that you are desperately in search of something; and the intensity of your desire is constantly evident from your eyes. However, you seem to believe that religion is an obstacle in your way. But remember my dear Hammad that religion appears to be an obstacle and a source of fear, as long as you remain away from it. But as soon as you come closer to it, you feel that it is something quite harmless and friendly. Don't remain away from religion. Make it your friend. May you live a long and happy life."

The train slowly started leaving the platform and I walked with it to the last end of the platform. Gradually, the bright faced old man who was waving hand to me, disappeared from my sight. But before his departure, in just one meeting, he had shown me several new angles of life.

CHAPTER 19

THE HOLOCAUST

At last, after trying for several days, I got the opportunity of talking to Joseph on this topic. I began the discussion with a simple question. "What is meant by the concept of holocaust?"

The moment he heard my question, he seemed frightened as if I had asked something quite unusual. He began to whisper as if we were sitting amidst a huge crowd, although at that time, as far as I could see, we were the only beings in the whole area surrounding the canal.

"As long as you're here, don't try to ask this question from anyone. This topic is treated here like the forbidden tree."

In amazement I looked towards this mysterious style of Joseph.

"Why, what's so special about this topic? Don't you remember that Sarah gave several arguments in support of it during her speech? The how has it become a forbidden tree?"

"Sarah is a Jewish girl and all her arguments were in favour of the holocaust. I was referring to the anti-holocaust arguments which are strictly banned here. I know you well. I'm sure that after coming to know of the actual reality of this idea, you'll discuss them with others and this is what I don't want."

"It means you're also an opponent of this concept."

"Not just me. There are a large number of people in the world who refuse to accept this hypothesis. But for the Jews, it is so sacred that not to speak of someone talking against it, they don't even tolerate someone thinking against it. They know well how to silence the opponents of the holocaust. Such people are imprisoned, expelled from the country or even silenced forever. Now, they've formulated a law by means of which opposing the holocaust has been formally banned."

"In this modern age, how's it possible to restrict someone's speech or thinking? Moreover, these people claim to be the champions of the freedom of expression. But why did they forget this freedom of expression when they were formulating such autocratic laws?"

"All of their claims about human rights and freedom of expression are their weapons which they use against other nations. Perhaps, you're still unaware of the fact that your speech at the University Hall must have upset many of them. It was for the first time in 130 years history of this university that someone openly spoke the truth on the stage in the presence of these people and they don't so easily forget such defiance; nor do they like it."

"These people! These people! But who are these people? If they're so bold and courageous, why don't they openly challenge their enemies? But what the hell is this holocaust?"

Joseph took a long breath. By this time, he had fully understood that I won't leave him unless he told me something about the holocaust. Thus, he began to speak in a low and subdued tone.

Jews have always tried to accuse the Germans of most of the so-called atrocities which have ever been committed against them. First of all, they accused the German knight Randflash of committing the massacre of Jews in the 146 Jewish settlements in Germany in 1298. Then, as a part of this false propaganda, they claimed that as many as 200 Jewish settlements were destroyed in 1336. But the worst accusation came from the Jewish leader David Bengurion who claimed that during the Second World War, Hitler exterminated more than five million Jews in the gas chambers. Some people believe this number to be about six million. This mass murder of Jews is known as the holocaust."

I was surprised at what I heard from Joseph. "But if Jews were killed in such large numbers, there must be some proof or record of their death; after all, the age of Hitler is not so old."

"There's no proof of it and the fact is that those who try to find its proofs, are punished. Only last year, a professor of history in Australia named David Irving received three years prison sentence, only because, he refused to accept the idea of the genocide of Jews in the holocaust during the Second World War."

"It's really astonishing. But what type of objectives did the Jews wish to achieve through this propaganda?"

“By means of this propaganda, they wanted to have a separate and independent Jewish state for their nation and their coming generations. During the Second World War, Britain and the United States had assured the Jewish leaders that at the end of the war, an independent Jewish state would be set up. This state finally came into being on the sacred land of Palestine. In this connection, even the then Soviet Union also extended full support to the Jews.”

Joseph recommended a number of books which could give me more detailed information about this topic. These books included “Were Six Million Jews Really Killed?” by Richard Harward, “The Drama of European Jews” by the French writer Paul Rauciniér, “The Imposed War” by the American writer David Hogan and several other such books.

It was indeed a most astonishing thing for me and I immediately started my search for these books in the relatively unknown libraries of the city because, they were not expected to be found in the main libraries. The more I read these books, the more secrets were revealed to me. I came to know that the propaganda of the holocaust was started after the First World War. All the allied troops were afraid of the German military might. The Jews who were playing a key role in the German weapons manufacturing industry, secretly conspired with Britain and the United States. They promised to support them on the condition that after the war, they would be allowed to set up their own separate independent state. The Germans lost the war due to the conspiracies of the Jews, who fully benefited from their propaganda about the holocaust. The allied countries extended full support to the Jews for permanently settling in Palestine and establishing the Jewish state of Israel. With the passage of time, the topic of holocaust was given the status of a sacred cow so that no one should say anything about it and no one might make any attempt to investigate into this matter. The most glaring reality revealed to me by all these books was that the word “Jew” is another name for conspiracy.

Now, I was eagerly looking for an opportunity to shatter the pride of the Jews. Most humbly, Kamran requested me not to get involved in such things. But as a matter of fact, he was less concerned about me and more concerned about Sarah, who might get a negative impression about him, although till that time, she did not know his name and even his face. In just one week’s time, I gained this opportunity. In the Humaneering class, sir Isaac told all the students to write term papers. There was no restriction on the choice of topics and anyone could choose any topic. However, it was necessary for all the students to tell about their selected topics beforehand. For this purpose, each student was required to mention his or her name along with the topic on the notice board. When the list of the names of all the students along with their selected topics was pasted on the notice board, everyone was flabbergasted to read that the topic which I had chosen for my term paper was holocaust. Within no time, the whole atmosphere of the University was filled with whispers and murmurs. As I came out of the library, I saw confused and worried Rebecca coming towards me. Without saying anything, she firmly clasped my hand and took me to a desolate corner of the corridor.

“Medi, are you in your senses?”

“Why, what strange thing have I done that has compelled you to ask me this question?”

“You’ve decided to write your term paper on holocaust, despite knowing very well that it is a Jewish university and its entire administration consists of Jews. Please take back your decision. I beseech you. I fold my hands before you.”

She literally folded her white hands and I laughed at her style. “Don’t worry, nothing’s going to happen. If these people feel pride in making fun of other nations and religions, there must be someone to show them the mirror.”

“O Medi, you don’t know how much worried I am about you. If something happens to you----.”

She became silent while talking and in amazement, I looked towards her who apparently seemed to be a carefree girl. At that moment, a number of colours appeared on her face and then disappeared. I had a feeling that the swan of love was once again spreading its wings somewhere in the distance.

CHAPTER 20

THE STONE HEARTED

Basically, I regarded religion as man's personal affair and was somewhat afraid of it. But I was able to overcome much of this fear as a result of my meeting with Mr. Rehmatullah at the railway station. I began to feel that religion can be discussed and debated with others and there is no harm in it.

I did not know how he had come to know that I regarded religion as an obstacle in the way of my love. Quite astonishingly, that old man had probed into the very depth of my soul and jolted it. Anyhow, I could now see my way.

In the meantime, I once went to Shakir's house and was told that he had gone to Islamabad with the Commissioner. Elections in the country were drawing near and quite naturally, my father had increased the number of his visits to the influential families. Nighat told me that she had given the pearls to Iman who sat silently for a long time with the pearls in her hands. She again advised Nighat to try to convince me that I should give up my obstinacy and return home, because, my whole struggle was nothing more than a wild goose chase. Nighat angrily asked her that if she did not have the least care for my feelings, why she was worried about my homelessness and my wretched life. Nighat further told her that she should not unnecessarily consider herself to be guilty in this matter because I was doing everything out of my own free will and, therefore, she should not blame herself for it. I was sad to think that these harsh words of Nighat must have shocked Iman. But Nighat told me that even if she had remained silent, Haya must have started quarrelling with her sister. Nighat herself was surprised to think about Haya's absolute trust in the sincerity of my love for her sister Iman and she did not consider me guilty in this matter. At that moment, my heart was filled with feelings of affectionate love for Haya. At least there was someone in that house who used to speak in my favour in the presence of Iman, secretly if not openly. It is said that if drops of rain continue to fall on a hard stone for a long time, they cause a hole in it. I was eager to know if the heart of that stone hearted Iman would also melt someday.

I was well aware of the fact that Iman was one of those girls whose parents are in full possession of the keys to all the doors of their hearts. Their likes and dislikes are conditional to the likes and dislikes of their parents and all the ways leading to their hearts pass through the drawingroom of their parents. They open the doors of their heart only when someone is permitted to cross this drawingroom and come forward. Otherwise, all the doors and windows of their heart remain shut forever. But if a person is not granted an entry to their parents' drawingroom, they become deaf and completely indifferent to him, even if he fatally injures himself by banging his head against the walls. They are like that princess of the fairyland, who remains imprisoned in a palace whose huge gates are constantly guarded by a terrible dragon or powerful giant.

But I had never had any doubts about the power of my love. Moreover, besides depending on this love and its power, I had no other option for passing the rest of my life. I knew that if this only valuable asset of my life was gone, it would mark the end of my life. Now, the only objective of my life was banging my head against this hard stone wall and trying to dig up a canal from a mountain not with the help of spades, hammers and other equipment, but with the help of my empty hands and weak nails. My nails had already been broken and my hands had already been badly bruised. But the stony mountain was firmly standing at its place with all its glory and splendour. However, even in these dismal circumstances, I was still in high spirits and continuing my hard labour somehow or the other. I was determined to carry on my struggle till my last breath.

As a strange coincidence, during this hard journey on this difficult path, all those who met me, assisted me in one way or the other and made my journey easier. Shakir, Nighat, Mr. Siddiqi, Ghafura, Sufi Rehmatullah and all the others whom I met on my way, encouraged me and boosted my morale, somehow or the other.

Rehmatullah had shown me a new path and I decided to tread on it. If in the Maulvi's opinion, religion was the only deficiency or flaw of my character, I had not till then, made any serious attempt to remove it. Generally, people go towards religion due to their love for religion but my case was

somewhat different. I was advancing towards religion for the sake of my love. Mr. Rehmatullah had told me that only one man among millions of people succeeds in attaining perfection in religious matters and I thought that there was no harm in my joining those millions of people who may not acquire perfection but whose intentions are good. It is true that I was going to do everything in this connection in order to achieve Iman but even then, it was much better than surrendering and renouncing my love. I, therefore, decided to try this option as well.

It was September, the month of approaching autumn and retreating summer. During the night shift at the railway station, a boy used to sell tea in the glasses fitted in an iron ring. The typical voice of that hawker, along with the sound of the rolling of a piece of iron in his hand could be heard throughout the station at night. His name was Babar and he was quite friendly to me. One night, I told him to wake me up at four-thirty in the morning. At exact four-thirty the next morning, he awakened me with his loud slogan of hot tea. For a long time, I had not had my bed tea and this desire of mine was also fulfilled that morning with the only difference that it was bench tea and not bed tea because, the hard wooden benches in the waitingroom had now become my bed. After having tea, I washed my face with water from a tap at the railway station. As I came out of the station, I saw a few tongas standing there with kerosene oil lanterns hanging on them. The tonga drivers were getting ready for their day's business. One of them was Khairu who came to me as I called him.

"O Babu 137, where do you intend to go so early in the morning?"

He always addressed me by the same name. I told him to take me to the old locality of the city and soon we were on our way. The roads and streets were silent and deserted and the whole city of Quetta seemed asleep. Within a short time, we crossed the Cold Road and reached the gate of the Maulvi's locality. When we arrived near the mosque, I told Khairu to stop there. He parked his tonga in one corner of the street and as usual, began listening to his single band radio. This particular habit of the drivers of tongas, rickshaws and taxis often surprised me. I used to notice that in all circumstances, they never forgot to hear the news on their radios. Later, whenever they got together, they used to discuss the various news items in such a way that they seemed to be sitting in the Parliament instead of the taxi or rickshaw stand. The way they listened to the news and commented on the news stories gave the impression that they were of the view that in case they did not perform this all-important duty, it would be a major loss for the country. On the contrary, most of those who reached the parliament, generally displayed that type of attitude which could be expected from the tonga drivers. While Khairu was tuning his radio in search of the news, I went into the mosque which at that time was almost empty. Gradually, worshippers began arriving and at last, Maulvi Alim entered the mosque and went to the place reserved for the Imam (Prayer leader). He led the Prayer consisting of two Rakats (a Rakat is one set of standing, genuflection and prostration). At the end of the Prayer, as he lifted his hands for the prayer, he saw me and was almost stupefied. But then, he thought of something else and completed the prayer. One after the other, all the worshippers came out of the mosque. I too came out without saying anything to the Maulvi and told Khairu to take me back to the railway station. He looked towards me in astonishment.

"How strange it is that you came so far only to offer your Prayer in this mosque. Have you made some sort of religious vow?"

"You may think so."

As Khairu drove his tonga, I was thinking that love is also a type of vow and there can be no vow greater than the vow of love.

Afterwards, it became my daily routine to offer my Fajr (Early morning) and Isha (Late night) Prayers in the same mosque where Maulvi Alim was acting as Imam. As far as the Zohr, Asr and Maghrib Prayers were concerned, I had to offer them at the railway station during my duty hours.

I had always regarded the offering of the Prayers as man's personal matter. I used to feel that the glory of the Prayer was damaged when it was offered by someone in the presence of other people because, in this way, it became a pretentious or showy affair. Due to this very reason, perhaps nobody might have seen me offering my Prayers at the railway station. Abdullah also noticed my

presence in the mosque at the time of Fajr and Isha Prayers. But he was a unique and brilliant young man who always met me with a smiling face and I never found the signs of anger, sorrow or tension on his face, in spite of the fact that he knew very well that by daily coming to the mosque, I was fighting a cold war with the Maulvi. The bitterness of this cold war was gradually increasing on the Maulvi's face.

Daily at night after the Isha Prayer, for about fifteen minutes, the Maulvi used to deliver a short lecture based on some problem or a saying of the Holy Prophet. Some people used to remain in the mosque after the Prayer, in order to hear this lecture. I was also included in the list of his regular listeners. These regular lessons were also attended by Abdullah who performed the additional duty of carrying the books of Hadeeth (Sayings of the Prophet) and Tafseer (Explanation and interpretation of the Holy Quran) from the shelf and taking them back to the shelf after the lecture. It seemed that the Maulvi had decided that he himself would never talk to me. Even then, whenever I said Salaam to him, he would respond to it and then go away with the same indifference and apathy. The same type of attitude can be expected from every gentle and respectable person.

For the next few days, I continued to follow the same routine of offering my Fajr and Isha Prayers behind him and attending his regular lectures. Sometimes during the lecture, someone from the listeners would ask a question and the Maulvi used to answer all such questions. On some occasions, these answers were short, while at other times, they were long. On one such occasion, somebody requested him to teach them the six Kalimas so that he could remember them by heart. The Maulvi asked him how many Kalimas he already remembered. He replied that he only remembered two Kalimas. The Maulvi heard those two Kalimas from him and then taught him the third Kalima. I who was also sitting there, heard it and memorized it after repeating it several times. After the Isha Prayer the next day, the Maulvi heard the three Kalimas from that man and taught him the fourth Kalima. I was again present on the occasion. In my heart, I also repeated it several times and thus memorized it. In the same way, the Maulvi taught him the fifth and sixth Kalimas and I too learnt them by heart. On the next day, the Maulvi asked him to recite all the six Kalimas and he immediately did so. The Maulvi was delighted and happily patted him on his back. In a low and subdued manner, I cleared my throat and said, "I've also learnt the six Kalimas by heart. May I recite them to you for correction?"

The Maulvi seemed startled as he looked towards me. A brief smile appeared on Abdullah's face but he at once concealed it. The Maulvi did not say anything to me. However, with the nodding of his head, he permitted me and I recited to him all the six Kalimas. I made a couple of mistakes but he himself corrected me. When I ended the sixth Kalima, he said "Jazakallah" (May Allah give you its reward) in a low voice. Abdullah also prayed for me in the same words. Afterwards, it became my routine that whenever the Maulvi taught anything to anyone, I also memorized it and then recited it to him. In this way I was able to learn Imane Mufassal (Elements of faith in detail) Imane Mujmil (Elements of faith in brief) and several other supplications like Duay Kunoot. When I was a child, another Maulvi had taught me all these things. But gradually, as I stepped into youth, I began forgetting these supplications which were replaced in my mind by the words of English songs and the names of their singers. But in these few days, I was again able to memorize all those holy words and supplications which I had forgotten because I had not revised them for such a long time.

The Maulvi also seemed to have reconciled himself to my presence in the mosque because, he had clearly noticed that I had never attempted to talk to him directly or to stand in his way for any purpose.

Sometimes, when the Maulvi could not come to the mosque for leading the Prayers, this duty was performed by Abdullah. One day, I directly asked a question from Abdullah. This question had been in my mind for several days, but I had not been able to ask it from Abdullah in the presence of the Maulvi. In an open hearted manner, Abdullah used to hear all my questions and tried to answer them in detail. In this way, the details of my religion gradually began unfolding themselves to me, although it was basically my love for Iman which had started this process

During all these days, Abdullah never talked to me about any personal matter even in solitude. However, with the passage of time, from the words of the Maulvi and Abdullah, I had started understanding several things which had till then remained hidden from my eyes. Khairu the tonga driver had also become quite familiar with me. At the time of Fajr Prayer in the morning and Isha Prayer at night, he did not like to pick up any other passenger. Before my coming out of the station, he used to arrive there with his tonga. In his heart, he had some respect for my "Vow" and through him, all the people at the railway station had come to know about my daily routine of going somewhere in connection with some "Vow". But quite interestingly, without saying anything to me about this matter, all of them had concluded that my "Vow" must be related to some love affair. They might have done so due to my age or perhaps, love itself is evident from every limb and organ of the lover. The eyes, appearance, gait and face of the lover loudly announce to everyone that this is the person who has committed the crime of love. This is the sinner who deserves to be stoned to death.

"Anyway, my "Vow" had become a popular topic of discussion among the people at the railway station. At times, Mr. Siddiqi left his office and went towards the stores of the dry port. Finding me sitting alone somewhere, he would come to me with a smiling face, scatter the hair on my head with his hand and go away without saying anything. There was a strange affection in his style. Through his silent actions, he seemed to be saying, "Young man, go on committing this crime of love; we are all with you; don't worry."

I continued to have occasional meetings with Shakir. Perhaps, Abdullah had told him about my regular appearance in the mosque. Afterwards, when Shakir met me, instead of saying anything to me on this topic, he simply hugged me and wept bitterly. Perhaps, love has been created for making everyone weep. With her tearful eyes, Nighat also arrived there from the veranda and tied a sacred thread on my hand to wish me success and safety in my hazardous amorous adventure. I did not get a chance to ask her anything about Iman. In fact, whenever Nighat saw me, she could not control her tears and it was quite difficult for me to bring her back to the normal condition. After tying the sacred thread on my hand, she lovingly arranged my scattered hair, placed her hand on my head and earnestly prayed for me as if she had been my elder sister. Thus, love had raised my esteem in the eyes of several people. On that day I realized that love simultaneously degrades us in the eyes of some people and elevates us in the eyes of some others. At one and the same time, love acts as a poison and an antidote.

CHAPTER 21

THE TERM PAPER

Eversince I had announced my decision to write my research paper on “Holocaust”, sir Isaac had also started remaining somewhat tense with me. When I met Joseph afterwards, he placed his hand on my shoulder and said, “I knew it would be extremely difficult to stop you. My prayers are with you.”

Inside the class, Rebecca was often seen reciting something silently and whenever she saw me coming or going, she would blow on me. Sarah looked calm but her gang always glared at me with blood thirsty eyes. At last, the same thing happened, about which Kamran had been warning me for several days.

On that day, due to some public event in the city, the university was closed before the usual time. The nearby roads were closed and arrangements were made for the flow of traffic from alternative routes. For the convenience of the students, the administration had decided to run the University buses one lecture ahead of the normal time. I had brought Kamran’s car that day and while Rebecca and I were coming out of the University’s main building, Jim, David and Tina were seen coming towards us. As usual, Jim stood in my way. I looked into his eyes. “What do you want from me? Why have you blocked my way?”

“I want that you should immediately get out of the University and never come here again.”

“But if I don’t do so?”

David came two steps forward. “Then we know how to deal with you.”

As Jim firmly caught my collar, Rebecca shouted loudly, “Jim, leave Medi! You are a beast.”

But Jim did not leave my collar. “Jim, leave my collar. Don’t compel me to.”

In the meantime, Sarah arrived there running from somewhere and I could not complete my sentence. With a jerking motion, she released my collar from Jim’s hands and shouted “Jim, What madness it is. I didn’t expect you to behave like a street gangster.”

On seeing Sarah, Jim cooled down and I went forward with Rebecca. Sarah ran after me and said, “I apologize to you on behalf of Jim. I don’t know what has happened to him.”

I attentively looked towards Sarah. “Perhaps, he’s unable to bear the truth. Of course, it’s extremely difficult to digest the truth.”

As Sarah stood there silently, I left her there and walked forward with Rebecca. While we were on our way, Rebecca used most abusive words for Jim. I was going to drop her at her apartment situated in the Piccadilly area. As we turned to the right from the central road of Piccadilly, she began shouting like children. Dressed like jokers at the road side, a clown was selling candy floss. With his grotesque actions, he was entertaining all the passing by children and was thus inviting them to buy his sweetmeat made of spun sugar. While we were children, we used to call it by the same name. I remembered an old man who used to wander through our streets in our childhood, carrying a large glass jar full of white and pink spun sugar balls that looked like cotton flakes. After properly spinning them and wrapping them around a thick straw, he used to give these balls to us. In England, they were known as candy floss, while we used to call it a sweetmeat made of spun sugar. Compelled by Rebecca’s loud noise, I had to park my car at the roadside. She at once jumped out of the car and ran to the clown, who gave her two large yellow and pink balls. With these cotton like balls in her hand, she beckoned me to join her at that place. She was indeed a restless girl and I had to get down from the car and go to her. For a long time, we remained seated together on a large stone sill at the road side and bought more balls from the clown. Even in our old age, we are not able to get rid of our childhood, which remains secretly sitting somewhere inside us and leaps out as soon as it gets a suitable opportunity. It then incites us to fill our pockets with nuts, urges us to blow a loud whistle on the road, forces us to buy the ice ball spread with sweet liquid from a stall on the way and suck them in a relishing mood. It also encourages us to buy and eat cheap spicy and sweet things on our way and eat them with immense delight without the knowledge of our family members. The same innocent childhood was evident from Rebecca’s actions that day and along with her, I also again

lived through some blissful moments of my childhood. But at that time, we did not know what was going to happen to us the next morning.

As soon as I entered the University the next morning, I was told that Jim and I had been summoned by the disciplinary committee to explain why we had disturbed the University's discipline and peaceful atmosphere. I had to give an oral explanation that very day and submit a written explanation within three days. Rebecca was furious. "It's sheer injustice. The whole University knows that Jim is to blame for the whole disturbance. It was he who blocked your way and in reply, you didn't say anything to him. I myself will talk to sir Isaac and I'll see how someone takes action against you."

In extreme anger, she was mumbling something to herself, while walking in the lawn and angrily beating her feet on the ground to vent out her fury. I laughed at her style and remarked, "You can also give vent to your anger while sitting somewhere."

She angrily looked at me and continued to stroll and grumble in the same way.

"I didn't expect Sarah to behave like this. With her own eyes she witnessed the whole incident then why didn't she tell sir Isaac that you're totally innocent."

Meanwhile, it was announced on the speaker that Jim and I should immediately appear before the committee to record our statements about the incident that had happened during the previous day. Within five minutes, we appeared before the committee in the room of the University Dean who was none other than sir Isaac.

I caught Rebecca by her shoulders and told her to sit down calmly. "Sit here peacefully and I'll be back soon after recording my statement. As long as I don't come, you won't stroll in anxiety. Understand?"

Rebecca sat down but tears could be seen in the corners of her eyes. I consoled that delicate sensitive girl, scattered her hair and walked towards the dean's room. Jim was already present in the room. Across the table, there was sir Isaac accompanied by three administrative members of the committee. The charge sheet against me was read out. It contained only one accusation that I had a scuffle with Jim the previous day and used abusive language against him, regardless of the University's discipline, honour and prestige. I was told that I had committed a serious offence by disregarding the rules and regulations of the University. Then, sir Isaac attended to me. "Yes Mr. Hammad, do you want to say something in your defence?"

"I only want to say that this accusation is absolutely false. None of my actions violated any law of the University. Jim blocked my way but the whole thing ended there."

"But according to Jim's statement, you had attacked him and the matter had become quite serious."

"I'm not surprised at Jim's statement but I still insist that it was a trivial affair which immediately came to an end. If the university's administration so desires, it can hold its own inquiry into the matter because, a large number of students were present at the time of the incident. With their own eyes, they saw what had happened. One of them is Miss Sarah Isaac who was an eye witness to the incident."

In utter astonishment, sir Isaac looked towards me. It was quite evident that he did not have the least expectation of hearing from me the name of his daughter as my witness. Same was the case with Rebecca when after coming out of the room I told her that I had given Sarah's name as a witness to the inquiry committee. "O Medi, what the hell have you done! Now no one can prevent your expulsion from the University, not even I."

CHAPTER 22

THE SAME EYES AGAIN

While I was still regularly going to Maulvi Alim's mosque to offer two Prayers, another incident took place. Daily at about four in the evening, a train named Bolan Mail leaves Quetta for Karachi. After leaving Quetta, its third station is the small town of Mach. It is known for a jail which was built here during the British rule. It is said that there was a time when this Mach Jail was as notorious as the Black Water prison centre in the Andaman Islands. The middle class people of Mach used to come to Quetta by the same Bolan Mail which used to arrive in Mach from Karachi at about eight in the morning. After doing their day's business in Quetta, they used to leave for Mach in the down express of the same Bolan Mail at four in the evening. In this way, they arrived back in Mach in about one and a half hour's time.

Mr. Siddiqi had a friend who was serving as Station Master at Mach Railway Station. One day, at the invitation of Mr. Siddiqi, he came to Quetta with his family. They were going back to Mach by the evening train. Their luggage consisted of a huge number of things and it seemed that they had bought at least one specimen of each and every item available in the markets of Quetta. When the train was about to leave, Mr. Siddiqi told a number of coolies to put the luggage in the train's bogie. When I saw them from a distance, I also went there to assist them in their work. I got the suit cases from Ghafura and another old coolie and rushed towards the train. As I looked around, I saw Abdullah standing in front of me. For a moment, he was wonder struck to see me in the dress of the coolies carrying several suitcases and boxes. With a smile I said, "Do you need a coolie? What about my labour?"

All of a sudden I felt as if someone had placed a burning coal on my tongue. Clad in black Burka, she was standing just behind Abdullah. Of course it was she. How could I ever forget those murderous eyes? Behind her stood Haya and an old woman wearing shuttle cock Burka. Perhaps, she was Iman's mother and all of them were coming after Abdullah and due to this reason, I could not see all of them at first glance. The suitcases were about to fall down from my hands. I put down the luggage and Abdullah shook hands with me. But at that time, I was no longer in my senses. I wonder why it always happened that whenever I came face to face with Iman, I no longer remained in control of myself. After each such encounter with Iman, I used to be extremely angry with myself. I used to wonder why I wasted that golden opportunity. Instead of becoming nervous, I should have continuously watched her with full concentration without winking my eyes for a single moment, as long as she remained before me. But once again, I was passing through the same experience. I don't remember what Abdullah said to me and what I said to him. When Ghafura and other coolies noticed that I was talking to some acquaintance of mine, they themselves lifted the luggage of Mr. Siddiqi's guests scattered all around me. Haya who was constantly watching me told something to the old lady about me. As usual, Iman was standing there with her lowered head. Then I realized that ever since she had unintentionally seen me at the station, her whole body had been trembling. I got the tickets from Abdullah's hands in order to guide them to their compartment. I tried to carry their luggage, but Abdullah did not allow me to touch it.

Their compartment was after two bogies. After seating the ladies inside the compartment, Abdullah himself came out to me. For a while, we both stood silently, without knowing what to say. Then suddenly, Abdullah caught my hands and touched his eyes with them. The moment I felt moisture in his eyes, I at once pulled back my hands and patted him on his shoulders. At times words fail us and we have to depend on our eyes for conveying our thoughts and feelings. But when eyes also start shedding tears, we are only left with our hands. With these hands, we hold the hands of others, pat them on their back, caress them and embrace them to indicate that we are with them and are sharing their grief. Standing at the railway station at that moment, I could convey my feelings to Abdullah only by means of this language of the hands. I noticed that at that time, tears had also welled up in Haya's eyes but she concealed them with the corner of her head covering. Iman was sitting beside her mother near the window. While going, Abdullah told me that all of them were

going to Mach where one of the Maulvi's sisters lived. They were going there to attend some ceremony. Till then, I had only had a few casual encounters with Iman but the moment I heard the news of his departure from Quetta, I had the feeling that the whole city would remain deserted and desolate forever in her absence. It appeared to me as if the train would take away everything from me including my heart. My whole existence was overwhelmed with a strange type of restlessness. As the train whistled again, Abdullah turned, embraced me and went towards his compartment in the train. Quite unintentionally, I looked towards Iman sitting in the compartment and for a moment, the station, the platform, the train, the people present all around me and talking in different languages, the noise, the earth, the sky and everything else went out of my sight. Only Iman and her two eyes remained in the universe. But it was not the only reason of my nervousness. At that moment, Iman was also looking towards me. Yes, it was a fact. For the first time in her life, she had looked towards me out of her own free will. The moment our eyes confronted each other, I noticed a shine of moisture in her eyes but then, in her bewilderment, she lowered her eyes. I felt that I had achieved the objective of my life and that I should stop breathing because, the rest of my life would be of no use.

Never in my life had I been so much proud of my good fortune. As the train jerked, the TT blew the whistle for the third and last time and the train slowly began moving forward. Abdullah was also now sitting on his seat and quite involuntarily, I raised my hand to bid him farewell and he too waved his hand. I began walking with the train. My condition was like that of a child who gives his favourite toy to some other child, but when that other child is about to go, he too starts walking with him. As the train was gradually accelerating its pace, I too increased my speed and was now literally running with the train. Some irrepressible desire was urging me forward and I had constantly fixed my gaze on the trembling Iman who was sitting inside with her bent head. The last end of the platform was now rapidly drawing near. I must have stumbled over several things scattered on the way. But despite my stumbling and staggering, with my wounded feet, I continued my struggle to keep pace with the running train. Perhaps, Ghafura had shouted something and some coolies had run towards me in order to stop me so that I might not be crushed under the train by falling at the end of the platform. But I was no longer conscious of what was going on around me. For some unknown reason, I was gripped by the feeling that if Iman once went out of my sight that day, I might never be able to see her again. With my eyes fixed inside the compartment, I continued running forward. But then, it appeared as if Nature had decided to show some mercy to me. Perhaps, the sincerity of all my prostrations in my wretched and pathetic condition had been accepted in the heavens. For a moment, Iman lifted her head and looked towards me outside the train. For the next few moments, she continuously watched me with her eyes full of utter helplessness, numerous questions and entreaties. After a while, the train speedily crossed the platform and went away and I could only hear the loud roaring sound of its wheels. By that time, I was completely out of my senses. Perhaps, somebody held me in his arms and with my face dripping with tears, I sat down on my knees at the same place and went on looking towards the train in a most helpless and miserable condition. I was surrounded by several people including Mr. Siddiqi, Ghafura and other labourers and coolies who were working with me at the railway station. All of them were consoling me, patting me on my back, caressing me and hugging me to show their support and sympathy for me, but I was conscious of nothing and the whole world had perished for me. There was something in Iman's eyes. Perhaps, she wanted to say to me that I should give up my madness and craziness. Moreover, the fire and smoke rising from my heart was causing some embarrassment for that virtuous lady. Yes, this was exactly the matter. But if it was so, what was meant by the helplessness and questions in her eyes. At that time, I was obsessed with the desire to go on running along the train on the railway track, to reach the town where she was going, find her out in that town, hold her face in my hands and ask her about the question in her eyes. If only she had asked that question just once and I would have explored the answer for her, even if it required me to pull out even the last thread of my soul.

It was getting late in the evening and gradually, the hustle and bustle on the station was decreasing. In one corner of the platform, some wooden boards and other useless things were being burnt and I was sitting near that fire. The wooden boards were snapping in the fire. Ghafura also came there. He placed his hand on my shoulder and sat near me. "Babu, a huge fire seems to be burning inside you. If it remains inside, it will burn and consume everything. Till this day, I had believed that only I had loved somebody but now I have realized that I don't know even the I of love. From where have you brought so much lava and so much fire? A single glimpse has burnt the whole station to ashes. Don't behave like that. Have some mercy on us. Tell us who you are. Why are you urging sinful people like me to commit more sins? You seem to be the prince of some empire. What are you doing here among the labourers?"

I had no answer to any of his questions. What could I tell him? Instead of saying something, I only held his hand firmly. Perhaps, my hands gave him some message and without speaking, he remained sitting there for a long time warming his hands. The pieces of wood in the fire went on snapping and making our faces bright with a golden glow.

After that incident, I noticed a strange change in the attitude of the people at the station towards me. Whenever I passed through the platform or any other part of the station, all the labourers, members of the staff and even my officers would stop for a while and look attentively towards me. There was a strange type of respect in their eyes for me. Thus, one episode of my love had made me respectable in their eyes, although I regarded that episode as an act of stupidity on my part and was very much ashamed of it. I felt a great deal of embarrassment and difficulty while facing my colleagues at the station on the next day.

Daily, I used to check all the trains coming from Karachi, hoping that Iman would return in one of them. But for four days, I had to face disappointment.

My Isha and Fajr Prayers at Maulvi Alim's mosque also became irregular, because all the time, my mind and heart were obsessed with those two eyes of Iman. All the time, I felt as if I had been suffering from fever. One day, after a great deal of insistence, Ghafura brought a doctor who asked me about my fever. Quite spontaneously, Ghafura remarked that I had been suffering from the fever of love. The Doctor also smiled and I thought that perhaps, it was indeed the fever of love. I then realized the power and strength of human emotions, which pierce into our body, join the circulation of blood, disturb our veins and muscles and upset the whole system of our body. How can an ordinary doctor understand such a complicated disease?

I had a high fever that night, but even then, I told Khairu to take me to the mosque in his tonga. Seeing the condition of my health, he showed some reluctance, but I went towards another tonga and Khairu had to agree to take me to my destination in his own tonga. On the way, he gave me his long Peshawari shawl to cover my body to prevent the further deterioration of my fever. I got down near the mosque, went inside and silently sat in one corner. As usual, Maulvi Alim arrived in time and led the Prayer. After the Prayer, there was his routine lecture followed by the question answer session. For a moment, he saw me sitting in the back row but then he became attentive towards the young man who wanted to ask some question from him.

"Does our religion allow love marriage?" asked the young man.

Quite unintentionally, I looked towards the Maulvi, who began his answer without seeing me.

"Islam allows conjugal love but it does not allow the other type of pre-marital love."

The young man was not yet fully satisfied with the answer. "But Islam does allow that the girl should be asked about her marriage. I have even heard that according to our religion, the girl and the boy can have a glimpse of each other before marriage. In other words their like and dislike must be kept in view in this matter."

The Maulvi's tone became somewhat harsh. "Yes, if it becomes necessary, it is allowed to a certain extent. But in our society, only those marriages are successful which are arranged with the consent of the parents. It is not wise to leave such an important decision up to the will and discretion of an immature and inexperienced weak girl. How can any parents in the world like to arrange the

marriage of their innocent daughter with some inappropriate person? It is therefore better that this decision should be made by the girl's parents and other elders of the family."

Perhaps, the young man was satisfied by this detailed answer, but at that moment, something strange happened to me. For the last several weeks, I had been coming to this mosque, but during this whole period, I had never asked anything from the Maulvi but due to some unknown reason, I could not control myself on that occasion. As the Maulvi was about to wind up the question answer session my voice surprised the people present there and they all stopped to hear what I had to ask.

"While finding a suitable match for their daughter, which religious qualities of the boy should be kept in mind by the parents?"

For a while, the Maulvi became silent, but due to the presence of other people in the mosque, he had to answer my question.

"The boy should have all the religious qualities. He should be fully aware of his religion, Prayers, fasting and other such things. Besides this, the parents of the girl should also consider the family background of the boy whom they have chosen for their daughter."

I continued the discussion. "But it is also possible that the boy is only making a false show of his religiousness to impress the parents of the girl."

"In such a situation, it would be a fraud and he will have to face the divine punishment for his fraud."

"I regularly offer the five daily Prayers and besides this, I have learnt the six Kalimas by heart. I believe that I fulfil all the terms and conditions which are required for marrying a Muslim girl. I wish to marry a girl. Please pray for me that her family may agree to this proposal."

On hearing these words, those who were sitting around me smiled and the Maulvi lifted his hands to pray, though with an unwilling heart. After the prayer, others left the mosque leaving me and the Maulvi alone in the mosque. He angrily looked towards me and began to speak.

"I knew very well that whatever you are doing here these days is only a false pretence and that your actual objective is something else. At last today, you have spoken out the thoughts of your heart."

"How can you give a final judgment about someone's religiousness and worshipping? It is a direct affair between man and God. How can you say that it is a pretence? Even if it is a pretence, you should encourage it, because, one day or the other, this pretence may lead someone to the right path."

The Maulvi who could not think of an appropriate answer, had to change the direction of the discussion. "What do you want from me? Why do you appear again and again before me?"

"You know very well what I want. On that day, you tried to make me realize that I'm not a religious person but the fact is that you can't lay the full blame of my non-religiousness on me. After my childhood, nobody made me realize the importance of such things. But it's never too late to mend. Anyhow, to a great extent, I now fulfil the religious conditions imposed by you. Even if there is still some short coming, I assure you to remove it within the shortest possible time."

At last, the outraged Maulvi burst. "Why don't you understand the fact that we're no match for you? I can't even think of marrying my daughter into your family."

"You know that now I've nothing to do with that family. I'm making this request in my personal capacity."

His voice began to quiver as he attempted to hide the tears in his eyes. "Why are you bent upon ruining my honour and respect? Whenever I see you in the mosque or even near my street, I can't sleep for the whole night due to extreme worry and anxiety. If once people start saying something, it's impossible to stop them. If some false accusations are leveled against my innocent and virtuous daughters, they will have to stay in their parents' home till their old age and death. Have some mercy on our poverty. Quetta is a small city and the area in which we live is even smaller than it. It takes no time for a story to spread here like wild fire. On that day, your domestic servants were saying many scandalous things about us. I'm thankful to Shakir who silenced them, otherwise, your mother and

brother's wife had left no stone unturned in hanging me to death. It's of no use to repeat whatever happened that day but now, my honour is in your hands."

"You shouldn't even imagine that I can do something to harm your reputation."

"If it is so, I again most humbly request you to remove this idea from your heart."

Maulvi Alim was now choking with emotions. After a while, he sat near me on his knees and folded his hands before me. For a moment, I was stunned and horrified at what he had done. I immediately caught his folded hands into my own hands. He was now literally weeping most earnestly.

"What are you doing! Don't make me more embarrassed and more sinful. I never intended to injure your feelings. I only."

As I saw his miserable condition, I seemed to have lost my words. He interrupted me and said, "Then, do what I've just said. Your family and our society will never accept this marriage relationship. She is the dust of the earth while you are a sky. You will be known everywhere as the Commissioner's son while wherever she goes, she will always be recognized as the daughter of a poor Maulvi. People will describe this relationship in strange terms. Till yesterday, your family members were saying scandalous things about me and my daughters, tomorrow; everyone will say such things behind our backs. I'm an Imam and people offer their Prayers behind me. If the same people start pointing fingers at the honour and respect of my family, how shall I be able to remain alive then? Just think over this matter for a while. Instead of leading such a life, it is better for me to strangle her with my own hands."

I had no more courage to hear his words. I pressed his hands and stood up. His white beard was still flooded with tears. When I came out of the mosque, my condition was similar to that of a gambler who puts everything at stake and is then beaten in the final round as well. Somehow or the other, when I reached the tonga, Khairu was much disturbed to see my condition and He at once placed his hand on my forehead. "O my dear! Your fever is very high."

He assisted me in lying on the back seat of the tonga and as he started driving the tonga, I was overpowered by a feeling of drowsiness. I was feeling angry at myself. I should not have talked to the Maulvi about this matter at that time. It seemed to me as if with my own hands, I had turned off the last torch of hope.

Man is indeed very impatient. As long as he is hopeful, he goes on scratching his wounds. Every time, on account of this hope, he again scratches his wounds before their healing. But when due to this repeated scratching, the wounds are transformed into dangerous ulcers; he goes on cursing himself for the rest of his life.

On seeing the miserable and wretched condition of the Maulvi at that time, it was better for me to go away from there, because, he was not in a position to listen to any rational explanation of my behaviour. Moreover, with his own hands, he had shattered the image of his self-esteem. If only, instead of doing what he did, he had scolded and condemned me and kicked me out of the mosque. How will I face him now? He seemed to have shut every door for me.

On the silent road, the tonga was producing its typical sound and going towards the railway station while I was full of strange fears and apprehensions. The circles of the yellow roadside lights could be seen at some distance from one another on the road. Like the dark patches of the road between these circles of light, my mind was also continuously wavering between light and darkness. By the time I reached the station, I had become completely unconscious and my mind had been lost in darkness.

CHAPTER 23

THE JURY'S VERDICT

I do not know whether or not the Inquiry Committee summoned Sarah to give evidence, but within three days, the Committee's verdict appeared on the Notice Board. Both Jim and I were expelled from the University for one semester and one semester meant six months. However, we were given

the right to appeal to the University Administration against the decision within three days. We were told that if we failed to file our appeals within the stipulated time, we would automatically lose this right. On one or two occasions during this period, I came face to face with Jim; and on each occasion, I noticed a strange satirical smile on his face. It indicated that he had achieved his objective which was to see my expulsion from the university at any cost. As far as his own expulsion for six months was concerned, for students like him, it only meant a picnic period. The university administration seemed to be fully collaborating with him in this conspiracy. The white people are habitual of doing everything in a very careful, systematic calculated and well-considered manner. While expelling me from the University without any genuine reason, they were apprehensive that I might go to the court. Thus, as a proof of their honesty and justice, they had prepared Jim to make some sacrifice.

Joseph and Rebecca were the only two persons at the University who were sharing my grief at this injustice. Rebecca's tears were unstoppable, though I had tried my best to make her understand that the final decision was yet to be announced, but she was not ready to hear anything.

It was the final day to file my appeal against the decision and I knew that I would have to leave the campus from the next day. I went to the Dean's room where all the four members of the Committee were already present. Sir Isaac again read out to me all the details of the matter and informed me that my written reply had failed to satisfy the committee members and therefore, they had upheld their decision to expel me from the University for one semester. When I looked directly into the eyes of sir Isaac, he looked around evasively. I began to speak in a calm and composed manner. "It's Saturday today and I know the sanctity of this day for the Committee's Chairman sir Isaac. I'm hopeful that on this holy day, he won't take any partial decision."

Saturday is as sacred for the Jews as if Friday for us. Sir Isaac understood the irony of my words but he had to bear them patiently. He asked me if I had something else to say in my defence. I shook my head and members of the jury held their pens in order to place their signatures on the verdict.

Then all of a sudden, the door opened and Sarah burst into the room. Sir Isaac looked towards her rather angrily. "Miss Sarah, don't you know that the routine matters are not being dealt with in the office today? The decision of an important inquiry is being announced here today."

"I've also come here to assist the jury in connection with the same decision. I'm sure that my statement will help the committee in drawing right conclusions."

Sir Isaac was desperately looking for some pretext for sending her out of the room but he had to put up with her as other members of the jury had also become aware of the whole matter. He again spoke in a decisive manner and this time his tone was rather harsh. "I don't believe that at this stage we are in need of any statement from Miss Sarah, because, Mr. Hammad himself has recorded his final statement and we have also announced our decision. As a last formality, we are about to sign this decision."

Sarah also perceived the threat in his tone and she too spoke in a decisive and forceful manner.

"No judgment is complete unless it fulfils all the requirements of justice. I'm an eye witness to the whole incident and up to this day, I wasn't told by the Committee that Mr. Hammad had given my name as a witness. Anyhow, I've come here to record my statement that Mr. Hammad did not do anything wrong in the whole incident. It was Jim who started the dispute and told Mr. Hammad to leave the University. In reply, he didn't say anything to Jim."

If it had been in sir Isaac's power, he would have at once forced Sarah to disappear from his sight.

Sarah waved a long list of names in the air. "It's the list of those forty students who with their own eyes saw the whole incident. All of them have come here with me. They are standing outside waiting to be called in for recording their statements. If the Committee allows, their statements can also be recorded."

It was quite evident that Sarah had made all arrangements. One after another, different colours could be seen appearing on and disappearing from sir Isaac's face. With a great deal of difficulty, he controlled himself.

“No, there’s no need for it. In these changed circumstances, the Committee will have to reconsider its earlier decision.”

Then he looked towards the rest of the members of the jury and asked their opinion. All of them agreed that Sarah’s statement had completely changed the situation. They requested to be given three days for reconsidering their earlier decision. It was quite obvious from sir Isaac’s face that he had lost the game. I was allowed to go and as I went out of the room, I saw all the students of my class and several other students of the University waiting for me. When Sarah informed them that the Committee had taken back its decision against me, Rebecca was the first to shout and raise slogans. Then, there was such a loud uproar of students that sir Isaac’s personal assistant had to come there and request them to go away because, sir Isaac had been greatly disturbed by the noise. Rebecca immediately announced a treat for the whole University and remarked that there could be no better occasion than that for using her father’s Australian Dollars. In a cheerful and hilarious mood, all the students went towards the cafeteria but Sarah silently went towards another direction. I saw her while she was turning towards the corridor leading to the outside of the main building of the University. I ran after her but by that time, she had gone far ahead.

“Sarah, please listen to me, please stop for a moment,” I shouted.

As she stopped, I went near her. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For helping me. If you hadn’t come at the right time today, the case would surely have been decided against me.”

“I didn’t support you. I supported the truth. And, therefore, there’s no need for any thanks.”

“There’re only a few people left in the world who like to support the truth and I’m glad to know that you’re one of them.”

Sarah smiled for a moment. “Then you should thank God who gave you the opportunity to meet one of those rare people.”

I also smiled to hear her words.

“You’re right. I’ll thank Him in solitude but for the moment, I wish to thank you.”

I turned and started going back. After thinking something, Sarah again called me. “I couldn’t understand one thing. Why did you give my name as a witness? In spite of the fact that I was one of those who were quarrelling with you.”

“I don’t know why I did so. But you seemed to be a truthful girl and I decided to test the credibility of my views about you.”

As Sarah laughed I noticed for the first time that two small dimples appeared in her cheeks while she laughed. “Well, what an occasion to test the credibility of your views about me. But if I hadn’t come just in time, what then?”

“I would have lost my trust in truth.”

Sarah carefully looked towards me. “You look pretty dangerous. Wish you best of luck.”

As Sarah went forward, she was still laughing. It was the first day of our friendship. Later on, Rebecca informed me that Sarah had not been called to testify before the Inquiry Committee, nor had she thought it necessary to appear before the Committee herself, because, after all, Jim was one of her oldest and best friends. However, when Rebecca told her that I had given her name to the Inquiry Committee as an eye witness, she was stunned for a moment, because, she had never expected me to do so. Rebecca could not understand why Sarah had decided to give evidence in my favour and how she had been able to convince half of the university students to do the same. Rebecca further told me that sir Isaac was extremely annoyed with Sarah and did not talk to her for several days. I do not know how Sarah was able to handle the whole matter. Anyhow, Sarah had proved herself to be a brave girl.

On the third day, both Jim and I were summoned to the Dean’s office by the Inquiry Committee. I was told that I was being acquitted because, none of the charges against me had been proved. Jim on the other hand was told that he would have to leave the University for one semester and that the

University administration would constitute a committee to consider his readmission after six months. Jim looked downcast and I requested the Committee to allow me to say something. I was permitted to speak and I said, "Sir, I don't have any personal rivalry with Jim. On that day, perhaps, I couldn't properly understand Jim's intentions. I later on realized that it was a serious joke on the part of Jim and David. But everything happened so quickly that none of us could properly understand the matter. I request the jury not to expel Jim for such a trivial matter. If both of us are heavily fined for this joke, we shall consider it to be an act of kindness on the part of the University administration."

Jim went on looking towards me in surprise. The jury appreciated my truth and after a warning, allowed both of us to resume attending our classes. While I was allowed to go out, Jim was detained in the office for signing some papers.

The next day, while I was sitting in the class and Madame Nancy was delivering her lecture on Economics, Jim entered the class. Even on ordinary occasions, he did not bother to seek permission for entering the classroom or going out. He came straight to me and stood near my desk. The whole class was dumbfounded and even Madame Nancy was finding it difficult to speak. For a while, he looked into my eyes and glared at me. The whole class was silent. Rebecca was tightly holding my hand. Then, without saying anything, he extended his hand towards me. With my other hand, I caught his hand. Jim pulled me towards him and then embraced me and all the students expressed their delight by banging their desks. Rebecca knew how to blow the whistle and the classroom began echoing with her loud whistles. As I looked towards Sarah, she was smiling and my heart said, "Love conquers all."

CHAPTER 24

UNCONSCIOUSNESS

When I regained consciousness, it was broad day light, but the place was quite unfamiliar for me. For a while, I lay in bed, trying to remember where I was. I recalled that during the night, Khairu had put me in his tonga and was taking me back to the railway station but here I was in a room, having a seven-type tin roof, a neat and clean bed, elegant curtains and large ventilators and windows. To whom did it belong?

After some time, I heard the train's horn and the whistle blown by the T T. It was quite evident that the railway station was not far away but whose house was it? I tried to get up, but the moment I raised my head, I felt as if instead of the head, a heavy iron ball had been attached to my shoulders. With a cry of pain, I held my head and again collapsed on the bed. Soon afterwards, there was some noise outside the room. Perhaps, someone had heard my voice. Then, Mr. Siddiqi was seen entering the room. He was carrying some tablets and a glass of juice. Seeing me trying to get up, he at once caught me by the shoulders and made me lie down on the bed again.

"Remain in bed, you haven't fully recovered yet."

"But sir, how did I come here?"

"You yourself have never told us anything. You seem to be determined to bear all the pain yourself, without letting anyone know anything about it. But perhaps, you are not to blame for it because, you are passing through a particular phase of your life in which people often behave like this."

Then with a smile, he put two tablets into my mouth and forced me to drink a half glass of water. I was embarrassed to see him serving me in this manner and I made another attempt to get up. "Sir, now I'm all right. But how did I come here?"

He placed a pillow behind my back and helped me in sitting.

"Three days ago, when Khairu brought you here in his tonga, you were suffering from intense fever and severe mental and emotional agitation.

I almost jumped and said, "It means I came here three days ago? But it was only yesterday when I"

"Yes, you have been lying here for three days, suffering from very high fever. Instead of shifting you to the railway hospital, I thought it better to keep you in this house for your proper treatment. The Doctor has been visiting you three times a day and thank God, since morning, the intensity of your fever has decreased to some extent. But you are still in need of more rest. Don't try to move an inch from here till you fully recover. In this connection, I won't allow any obstinacy on your part."

O God! For the last three days, while suffering from fever, I have been a burden for this gentleman. This thought made me angry at my own condition. I had already bothered him so much, so I should not give him more trouble.

"Sir, believe you me, I'm perfectly all right now. I've already been a burden for you and your family during the last three days. Don't add to my embarrassment."

"First of all, take back your words about being a burden for me. Secondly, I live alone in this house. I don't have mental harmony with my wife and, therefore, she stays with her parents for ten months in a year; and as far as children are concerned, I have none. I'm having a wonderful time here, living alone with a few servants."

He smiled and continued to speak. For an unmarried person, loneliness may be torturous but after marriage, this torture is transformed into a great joy when the wife goes to her parents. If you don't believe it, after your marriage send your wife to her parents for a few days and then you will realize the truth of what I've just said."

I also smiled. "I'm very much thankful to you sir, but how can I live here? I know that I've already disturbed you in your loneliness."

"O my dear, loneliness is my age-old friend. At times, it is also bored by living with me for such a long time. Don't worry about my loneliness."

Not to speak of leaving that house, I was not even allowed by him to leave that room, despite my repeated insistence. However, in the evening, when the servant arranged the tea in the outside veranda, Mr. Siddiqi took me there with him.

From In front of Quetta railway station, there passes a sub-road that leads to the left and joins the main road. It is commonly known as Kalun Road. The bungalows of railway officers are also situated on the same cold road. One of them was a small bungalow where Mr. Siddiqi lived with his servants. These bungalows having red tin roofs were built during the British rule, keeping in view the weather of Quetta. They were built in the typical British architectural style. Outside the rooms, there was a veranda, where greenwood pillars which carried the roof, were standing at some distance from one another. In front of the veranda, there was a vast orchard having apple, grape, pomegranate and pear trees and a large number of flowers. Mr. Siddiqi seemed to have a refined taste. While taking a sip of tea, he attentively looked towards me.

“During your unconsciousness and hysteric condition, you were saying a lot of things. But for most of the time, you were talking in English and not in Urdu. It shows that while you were at home, you didn’t use Urdu on most occasions.”

Thus, he himself asked me what I had been apprehensive of. I was already disturbed by the thought that I had been lying there in an unconscious state for three days. I wondered what foolish things I might have said in my frenzied condition.

I remained silent for a few moments and then Mr. Siddiqi resumed the discussion. “If you don’t wish to tell anything about your past life, there’s no harm in it, but when you came here on the very first day, I realized that you are not what you appear to others. Your eyes, your accent, your hands and everything else indicate that you are totally different from those people among whom you’ve been living for the last several days. Although I’m not aware of the compulsions that brought you here, yet I wasn’t much surprised to hear lucid English from your mouth during your unconsciousness. But it’s not good to be so much annoyed with the whole world. Sometimes, if we share our feelings and thoughts with others, it gives us immense relief and lightens the burden of our heart.”

In reply, I began to speak in a feeble voice. “I haven’t got much to say. I left my home in pursuit of an aim which has now become the aim of my life. Now, it has become the focal point of my whole existence. My days and nights are devoted to it and I feel that the rest of my brief life would be spent in the pursuit of the same objective. It is the sum and substance of my whole story.”

Mr. Siddiqi was lost in some deep thought. “Well, you’re quite fortunate. At least, you’ve got an objective in your life and the fact is that this is the crux of life. If at any point of your struggle, I may be of any help to you, do let me know. I’m eagerly desirous of doing something which may be a source of pride for me. If I may not succeed in love, at least, I should be able to assist someone in succeeding in love.”

He used the words Assist in love exactly as the policemen use the word “Accomplice” for a person who assists someone else in committing a crime and both of us laughed. For the next two days, he did not give me the opportunity of saying anything. On the third day, with a great deal of difficulty, I was able to persuade him to let me go, on the condition that I would regularly have my evening tea with him. He even warned me that if I failed to turn up for the tea on some evening, he himself would go to the stores of the dry port to take me with him. He continued to insist that I should shift to his house permanently and promised never to ask me anything about my past life. But I assured him that neither the fear of his questions nor my past life were preventing me from staying with him, instead, I was apprehensive that my stay with him might damage the objective for which I had left my home and come to the station. At last, on the evening of the seventh day, I said good-bye to him at the gate of his bungalow, although he was insisting on accompanying me to the railway station. As I left his house and started walking alone on the Cold Road, I was thinking about this strange and kind hearted person who accommodated a stranger in his house for a week and became

so much familiar with him that on his return, his eyes were filled with tears. Of course, man is the greatest healer of man.

As soon as I arrived at the platform of the railway station, all the people working there became aware of my return and gathered around me like bees which cluster around their hive. I had to assure each of them individually that I had fully recovered from my illness. Some of them embraced me so warmly and enthusiastically as if I had just returned from the battlefield. At last, Ghafura had to intervene. In his loud roaring voice he told all of them that I had only slightly recovered from my illness and that if they thronged around me in the same manner, I would not be able to take proper rest. He told all of them to leave me alone for the time being. No one could disobey Ghafura and the crowd of people around me gradually decreased. Ghafura held my hand and told me to sit on the bench. He himself sat in front of me.

"I knew very well that you won't stay with Mr. Siddiqi for a long time and that you would soon come back to us. I knew that you won't like the peace and comfort of his house for a long time, because, you get peace only in restlessness."

Perhaps, he was annoyed with me for having returned from Mr. Siddiqi's house. With a smile I looked towards him. "Are you angry with me?"

"Don't say such things now. What's the use of my anger? You've never considered me to be your well-wisher and friend, otherwise, you would surely have told me about the Maulvi affair."

In astonishment I looked towards him.

"Yes, Khairu the tonga driver has told me everything. But he is not to blame for it, because, that night when you went inside the mosque and didn't come out for a long time, in a state of great alarm and anxiety, he himself went into the mosque, thinking that your condition might have further deteriorated. But before entering the mosque, he had heard the whole discussion between you and the Maulvi. However, Khairu is a trustworthy friend of mine and believe you me; he won't leak out this secret to anyone else. After dropping you at Mr. Siddiqi's house, he came straight to me. He might not have told anything even to me but he had been greatly upset to see your miserable condition. He was afraid that something serious might happen to me. If your health had not improved in the next one or two days, we would have gone to your home to inform your family about your condition.

His words startled me. "My home?"

"Yes, Khairu had heard whatever the Maulvi said. We know that you are the son of a lord. We know everything. Perhaps, Ghafura was using the word "lord" to mean the Commissioner. I remembered that the Maulvi had told me that I would always be known as the Commissioner's son wherever I might go. In other words, my secret had been leaked and it clearly meant that it was time for me to leave this place and go somewhere else. I knew that sooner or later, all the people working at the station with me, would come to know of my reality and, therefore, I thought that it was much better for me to leave that place as soon as possible. Ghafura was closely watching me. It seemed as if he had read my thoughts. "But listen to me carefully, by God, if you ever made an attempt to go away from here to some other place, I would tie you with ropes and tell everyone here that the stranger who has been living with us for so many days is a prince."

I laughed at his words and he held my hands and spoke in a rather melancholic tone.

"For the sake of my friendship, don't go anywhere from here. I promise not to tell anything about you to anyone. But if you moved to some other place, I would never be able to see my own face."

"All right, I won't go anywhere but on the condition that as usual, I myself would do all my work and you won't give me any special treatment due to my friendship with you or my family position, otherwise, I wouldn't stay here even for a single day."

Ghafura joyfully kissed my hands and tears appeared in his eyes. "You really don't belong to this world, but who would realize the worth of your love in this world? If you order me just once, I myself would go to that Maulvi, fall down on his feet and serve him as a slave for the rest of my life."

“No, not at all. It’s not a matter of orders. It’s a matter of requests. I’ve made my request and now, I’m left with no alternative except waiting for the outcome.”

Ghafura’s eyes were filled with a special type of love and respect for me. For a long time, he remained sitting with me and we talked about different casual matters. Later, Khairu also came there and hugged me very warmly for a long time. As far as human emotions are concerned, the poor people are really very rich in this connection. When they develop some warm feelings in their heart for someone, they are always ready to sacrifice everything for him. The only thing required is that there should be someone capable of touching their heart. Keeping in view the melancholy of my heart, neither Ghafura nor Khairu said anything else about the Maulvi and his family. They continued talking to me about different trivial matters to divert my attention. In one matter, they were rivals of each other. Dilip Kumar was the favourite film actor for both of them and each of them was always busy trying to prove himself to be the real admirer of Dilip Kumar. Khairu was always referring to a movie in which Dilip Kumar had played the role of a tonga driver. According to Khairu, he had been working as a tonga driver ever since he had watched that black and white movie. Ghafura on the other hand always talked about a movie in which his favourite hero had played the role of a labour union leader. Since then, in his practical life, Ghafura had been trying to play the same role. Whenever I found them sitting together, I would deliberately mention Dilip Kumar’s name; and then, for several hours, they continued their discussion on their favourite topic. Quite often, their discussions changed into heated debates which ended up in loud quarrels. On that day again, Khairu angrily went away, because, Ghafura had remarked that a great actor like Dilip Kumar should not have played the role of an ordinary tonga driver. After his departure, Ghafura and I laughed heartily at Khairu’s sentimentality. Then all of a sudden, Ghafura remembered something and slapped on his own head. Talking to himself he said, “To hell with you O Ghafura. You’ve forgotten it.”

“Why, what happened? What have you forgotten?”

“I was so much delighted at your return that I forgot to tell you that while you were ill last week, a bearded young man came here and was asking about you. He told me his name. It was something like----.”

He placed his hand on his forehead and began recalling his name.

I felt my heart leaping into my throat and my tongue sticking to my palate

In a low trembling voice I uttered the name “Abdullah?”

Ghafura clapped his hands in delight. “Yes, Abdullah. This is exactly the name he told. He seemed much worried. I told him about your illness. He again came here yesterday and told me to convey the message to you that as soon as you get well, you should meet Mr. Shakir. There may be something important.”

I could feel explosions taking place in my mind. Why did Abdullah come here? Why does he want me to meet Shakir? The Maulvi’s condition may have got worse. He may have changed his mind. But how was it possible? Abdullah wasn’t here. He had gone to Mach with his family and he had not returned home by the time I had my last meeting with the Maulvi. I felt my heart sinking. It was time for the Maghrib Prayer (Maghrib Prayer is offered immediately after sunset) and I sent a message to Khairu that he should keep his tonga ready as I had to go to the old Haveli at once. Ghafura repeatedly insisted that I should go to Shakir the next morning because it was getting dark and I had not fully recovered from my illness. But in my extreme restlessness, I could not stop even for a single moment. I was eager to reach the old Haveli in the twinkling of an eye. Khairu was driving his tonga as fast as he could because I had told him to reach the old Haveli within the shortest possible time. The main roads of the city were not so much crowded and soon we reached the long road leading to the outskirts of the city where the Haveli was situated. I was pre-occupied with my own thoughts and apprehensions and was praying for something good to happen. At last, I was roused from my reverie when Khairu suddenly pulled the reins of the horse in front of the Haveli. I told him to wait for me at the same place. In the Haveli’s lawn, Nighat had placed raw apricots for drying

them. Now, she was gathering them with the help of other servants working in the Haveli. The moment she saw me, she came running towards me. When her breathing became normal, she started touching my hands and face in extreme anxiety.

“Brother, what happened to you? How did you fall ill? Why are you looking so weak?”

In response to her barrage of questions, I had to tell her briefly about my illness. Immediately afterwards, I asked her where Shakir was. I also told her about Abdullah’s message. She told me that Shakir had not yet returned from duty. While she was speaking, I gathered from her tone that she knew about Abdullah’s message but did not have the courage to talk to me about it. Compelled by the situation, I had to tell her to swear about the matter. Apparently, for a long time, she had been trying to control herself and when I insisted, she broke down and started weeping bitterly. I was already much confused and disturbed, Nighat’s condition made me totally unnerved.

“For God’s sake Niggy, tell me something. What has happened? Is everything all right at Maulvi’s house? Is Iman quite well?”

She looked towards me with a wounded glance. At that time, she resembled a person who goes to a dying soldier in the battlefield with a glass of water. But before giving him the last draught of water, he observes most sorrowfully that the soldier is breathing his last.

“The Maulvi has settled the marriage of Iman and she’s going to be married on the 15th of next month.”

For a few moments, I felt as if I had been deprived of all my senses including the senses of hearing, seeing, speaking and understanding, etc. I only felt a sort of vacuum around me. But then I realized that it wasn’t something so unexpected. After my last encounter with the Maulvi, he was expected to take a similar step as a preemptive measure. He had categorically stated to me that he would never agree to marry his daughter with me because, he seemed to be terribly afraid of his daughter’s defamation and of what other people would say about such a marriage. Having observed my fanatical and frenzied condition, he did exactly what any noble person could be expected to do. Even then, this news was no less than a bomb explosion for me. Nighat could very well imagine my condition and thus, for a long time, she stood there, holding my trembling hands in her own hands. Human nerves are indeed a strange thing. They can claim to be the weakest and the strongest part of the human body at one and the same time. We know that one day or the other, all of us have to die. Even then, whenever we hear the news of the death of some near or dear one, our nerves seem to be paralyzed for some time. Perhaps, all the time, we are deliberately attempting to assure ourselves that something which is bound to happen, may not happen. The Maulvi’s final decision about her daughter’s marriage was the same type of news for me and my nerves. In fact, we realize the seriousness of certain things only when they have actually taken place. The very idea that my beloved would soon belong to someone else was sufficient to squeeze my soul. It is interesting to note that I never had a chance of talking freely with Iman. If she had responded to my love in some way, or made some promises with me, my heart might have burst on hearing the news of her marriage with someone else. For a long time, Nighat and I stood silently. With the descending evening and advancing darkness, all the birds had returned to their nests in the tall trees of the Haveli and had become silent after making a lot of noise. Finally, I mustered up my courage and in a quivering tone asked “Who’s he? Who’s going to be married to Iman?”

“She’s going to be married to her uncle’s son Abdullah.”

“Abdullah? But---” I seemed to have lost all my words. It was for the second time in the past few moments that I had been thunder struck. Abdullah himself had witnessed my crazy love for her. How did he agree to marry her? My thoughts were jumbling up in my mind. I was told by Nighat that the Maulvi had an elder sister who lived in Mach. Besides being Abdullah’s auntie, she treated him like her own children. While the members of the Maulvi’s family were going to Mach with Abdullah, he gave them a letter for his sister. On their return, she also accompanied them to Quetta. When the Maulvi talked to her about Iman’s marriage, she proposed Abdullah’s name. Being his elder sister, she even said that she had the right to ask for Abdullah’s marriage with Iman. Perhaps, the Maulvi

himself had been cherishing the same desire and due to this reason, after thinking over the matter for the whole night, he gave his consent to this proposal. But what about Abdullah? Did someone ask his opinion? Why did he agree to this proposal? He was quite justified in agreeing to this proposal. He knew very well that Iman was not to blame for anything in the whole affair. She had not even once looked voluntarily towards me. Abdullah had only seen my mad love for her. My heart itself was asking questions and answering them. For a long time I sat there, deploring my fate. I did not know why Shakir had been so late in returning that night. Moreover, I knew that Khairu must be waiting for me in his tonga outside the Haveli. For this reason, despite Nighat's insistence, I got up to leave.

"What to do now?" asked Nighat while I was about to leave.

I had no answer to her question. Man can fight against thousands of enemies. But how can he fight against his own hostile fate? I had already received several deadly blows from my fate and did not know how many of them still lay in store for me. After consoling Nighat in a half-hearted manner, I came out and found Khairu waiting for me. The moment he saw me, he spurred the horse and we were once again on our way to the railway station. Khairu had several good habits but the habit which I liked the most was that he never liked to interfere in someone's privacy by asking something from him. He remained silent and waited for the other person to reveal the matter himself. After dropping me at the gate of the railway station, he himself moved forward to park his tonga in the stand. In a despondent and dejected mood, I entered the platform. The whole station seemed desolate and deserted. I had already spent several sleepless nights on the station but the taste of the pain, suffering and loneliness of that night was totally different.

In the morning, while I was thinking of going to Shakir's house again, I heard Ghafura's voice.

"There he is Mr. Hammad."

At that time I was standing near the guard room at the last end of the platform and getting ready to unload the luggage from the morning train. I was startled and as I looked around, I saw Abdullah coming towards me. For some unknown reason, I continued looking towards him as if I had seen that young man for the first time. So this was the fortunate young man who had won my Iman. Although he was my rival, I could not call him my rival. He was standing there with downcast eyes and for a while, both of us seemed to have forgotten our words. Finally, I had to observe the formality.

"How are you? Is everything O.K. in your family?"

His eyes were still downcast. "Yes. We are all right. I've come here to beg forgiveness from you."

"I'm not worthy of it. Don't embarrass me."

"This morning, I went to meet Mr. Shakir. I was told that you came there last night. I've already come here twice in search of you."

"Yes, I've got the news. Congratulations to you on your upcoming marriage."

Perhaps, despite all my efforts, I could not hide the bitterness of my tone. As if struck with a sudden shock, Abdullah lifted his head. There was a tinge of complaint in his eyes and I was ashamed of the choice of my words.

"You have every right to say whatever you like. I may never be able to reveal to you the exact condition of my heart."

"I didn't intend to injure your feelings. At times words determine their own meanings although we don't use them to convey the sense which is taken by others."

Abdullah attentively looked towards me. Even at this stage, you are apologizing to me. It really indicates your large heartedness. The fact is that since my childhood, I've been under the burden of the innumerable favours showered on me by my uncle the Maulvi. If I try to count these favours, I may not be able to do so in the whole of my life. He brought me up not as an uncle but as a father, and even more lovingly. He himself bore all the troubles and hardships, but didn't allow any hard time to come upon me. His own hands were blistered but he didn't allow even a single blister to appear on my feet."

"So was it the burden of his favours that compelled you to agree to this marriage?"

Abdullah saw me with a shattered look. "Nowadays, he is in such a condition that even the slightest shock can ruin him forever. Yes, it's true. While sitting alone in the room with me, when he removed the turban from his head and placed it in front of me, without the knowledge of my auntie and the rest of the family, I found myself speechless. He knows that I'm fully aware of your infatuation for Iman and perhaps due to this reason, he had to put his honour at stake before me, although perhaps, he has always had the same desire in his heart. But he became afraid when you got involved into this matter. He was apprehensive that in case of Iman's marriage into some other family, compelled by your mad love for her, you might narrate this story to her in-laws; and if her husband comes to know of it, it may ruin her life forever. In the light of all these things and in view of his countless favours on me, what else could you expect me to do? If you had been in my place, what would you have done?"

In response to his question I placed my hand on his shoulder and said "I would also have done exactly what you did at that time."

There was some movement in his tense body and his tight veins became loose.

"Didn't I say that such a courage can only be expected from a large hearted and generous person like you? But at this point, let me confess another truth before you. Since my childhood I knew that I would be married to Iman. In his heart, my uncle has always had those feelings of likeness which a father can have for his would-be son-in-law. When I advanced from adolescence towards youth, my first choice was Iman and since that first choice, I've been loving her most intensely. The intensity of love can be imagined only by a person who himself has loved somebody but up to this day, I've never expressed my love. In the beginning, I didn't feel the need for any expression because Iman had always been destined for me. I thought of narrating to her all the romantic tales of my restlessness for her during the first night after marriage. One after the other I would remind her of different things which I used to do. I would explain to her why I used to place peacock feathers in her books, why I used to ask her to bring a glass of water for me while having my meals, why I used to ask her to press my clothes which she had already pressed and why I used to bring betel leaves for her in the cold winter nights from distant shops without the knowledge of her father."

Abdullah was talking uninterruptedly with tears in his eyes while the noise of violent wind storms blowing in my mind was continuously increasing. It was again the power of love due to which he always looked different from others even in a huge crowd.

Abdullah was still speaking. "But then you came. I know very well that Iman must not have given any response or any hope to you, because I've known her since childhood. Modesty, virtuousness and tolerance are the most essential ingredients of her structure and perhaps, there can be no scope for any other form of love for her. The pleasure of her father is the main objective of her life and for bringing a moment's smile on his lips, she can sacrifice her whole life and even her faith."

"But I don't know why, you seemed to me quite different from others and I began to feel that gradually, you would win the confidence of the Maulvi. As a matter of fact, I became afraid to think that Uncle might crumble before you. My selfish thoughts made me weep in solitude and I began asking myself what would happen if you succeeded in your aim. I had been terribly frightened by the force of your love because your love is a storm which can sweep away everything. But quite astonishingly, in spite of all this, I could never have any negative feelings for you, nor could I ever hate you even in my heart. Perhaps, it was also one of the wonders of your love. But my heart finally accepted defeat when I saw you at the railway station in the form of a coolie. A weak person like me can never be expected to defeat you. On that very day, my love fell prostrate before your love. But alas, Uncle couldn't understand this love. He is a timid and frightened father. Due to his particular training and environment, there is no room for any such love in his heart. Instead, he considers it to be a cardinal sin. I've come here to apologize to you. The members of my family didn't realize the worth and value of your supreme love. Please forgive us all."

Abdullah's voice was choking with emotions. When I lifted my head I saw that brilliant young man with tearful eyes standing before me with folded hands in the manner of begging forgiveness. I at

once held his hands, pulled him towards me and hugged him. Both of us were weeping now because, we had nothing else to say. We could convey our feelings and thoughts to each other only by means of the language of tears.

What an exciting and inspirational scene it was. Till then, the world had only seen the rivals fighting with each other and taking each other's life. But how strange these two rivals looked, embracing each other and weeping together. One of them was weeping after getting everything while the other one was weeping after losing everything.

Abdullah did not stay there any longer. For a moment, he caught my hands touched them with his wet eyes and then went away from there. I stood there watching him as he disappeared. I have hardly ever seen such a bold and courageous person. He came to me, bravely told his truth to me and then went back. Most of us spend the whole of our life trying to take such a decision. For years and years, we are unable to speak the truth which may be of a much smaller magnitude than this. During this whole period, we go on telling lies until we completely forget how to tell the truth. The fact is that only lovers can speak the truth; because, love is the only truth of this world and all the other emotions are the product of some hypocrisy.

If Abdullah had not confessed his love for Iman before me, I would never have known it throughout my life. He did not have any compulsion for revealing his secret to me. But it was his inside truth which had compelled him to come to me. Abdullah had returned after telling his truth but I was yet to face several horrible truths of my life alone and the bitterest of all these truths was that Iman now belonged to someone else.

CHAPTER 25

THE WIZARD

After that incident in which Jim quite unexpectedly extended a hand of friendship towards me, Rebecca gave me the name of WIZARD. She did not know that a pretty girl living far away in my native land had taught me every mode of living along with this art of wizardry which Rebecca considered to be a part of my personality.

Even on that day while sitting with me in the class, she was harping on the same tune. "I'm at a loss to understand how you do all such things so easily. A girl like Sarah had a row with her father but testified in your favour. A proud and insolent son of an aristocrat himself came to you with an olive branch. If it isn't magic, what else is it? I also wish to learn this art from you. Would you like to teach me this whole thing?"

"I haven't done any unusual thing which is the cause of so much surprise for you. Sarah, Jim, You and I are all human beings and the whole thing depends on our understanding of other human beings and considering them to be human beings like us."

"But my dear Medi, understanding the human beings is the most difficult thing in the world. However, I hope to learn it in your company."

In the meantime, Rebecca was called by one of her friends and I received a message from Joseph who was standing near the canal. It was a bright sunny day in London and he was again in the mood of painting. In order to enjoy the weather to the maximum degree, all the students vanished from the class and could be seen lying in different postures in the grassy lawns. As a matter of fact, while living in London I also began to believe that bright sunshine was a rare commodity. Joseph had not yet completed his painting but he had invited me not to show me his own painting but Sarah's painting. Clad in a dark blue skirt and sky blue sweater, she was standing there at some distance in bright sunshine and looked quite indifferent to the whole world while completing her painting. Joseph beckoned me to go to her and he himself became busy in completing his own painting. I went on watching Sarah while she was giving final strokes to her painting. After completing the work, she looked towards me to ask my opinion.

"It's very fine but it isn't complete yet. There's something missing or lacking in it. It gives an impression of incompleteness."

"Excellent. It means that you know the language of colours as well. You've said the right thing. You'll get the impression of incompleteness from every painting of mine. But after sir Joseph, you're the first person to notice this short coming. I don't know why I always finish every painting before completing it."

"Perhaps the reason is that the theme of each of your paintings is some search or inquiry but before the completion of that search, you lose heart."

Sarah cast a serious look on me. "No, that's not the case. Why should I be in search of something?"

"You may be in search of truth."

"Truth doesn't require any search. It's crystal clear and quite apparent. What about your term paper? Have you completed it?"

"I'm in the middle of my work, but several people are already annoyed with me due to this term paper."

I was referring to sir Isaac and Sarah looked seriously towards me.

"I wonder why people are so much afraid of you."

"Darkness is always afraid of light."

"But I'm not at all afraid of you."

"Didn't I say that you're a truthful girl? And how can truth be afraid of light?"

Sarah laughed loudly. "Didn't I also say that you're very dangerous and you never lose any opportunity?"

I also laughed. "Don't worry. You're in no danger from me."

“By the way, by forgiving Jim, you’ve changed his heart. The same Jim who was your deadliest enemy until a few days ago now spends the whole day narrating your good qualities.” “I didn’t come here to start hostilities. I’m sorry to know that there was some bitterness between you and sir Isaac because of me.”

Sarah was shocked. “Oh this Rebecca! She can never hide anything. There’s nothing so serious between me and Papa. In fact, we often have differences and disagreements. Papa was upset because in the last thirty years, no one has ever attempted to challenge his decisions at the university. But I frankly told him that every new thing has to start one day or the other. These words further outraged him and Mama had to intervene and at last, as usual, Papa had to yield.”

“It seems you love your Mama very much.”

Her eyes began to shine. “O yes, she’s so dear to me. Papa always treats me like sons and has very high expectations from me. But Mama always prefers my choice. She alone knows the true condition of my heart.”

Sarah’s love for her mother was quite evident from her tone and gestures. “Now she also knows a lot of things about you. I’ll introduce you to her someday.”

“Sure. I would love to meet that lady who rules over sir Isaac’s heart and yours at one and the same time.”

The way I admired her mother made her laugh heartily. “I’ll surely tell these words of yours to Mama.”

For a long time that day, Sarah and I went on talking without knowing that we were being constantly watched by someone from a window of the second floor; and that someone was none other than Sarah’s father sir Isaac who still had some reservations about me in his heart.

As the final date for the submission of the term papers was drawing near, I was spending most of my time going through the research books dealing with the holocaust. While studying all these books, I was continuously preparing notes. On that afternoon, I remained in the library for a long time in search of my relevant material. As far as the university library was concerned, it had a lot of material in support of the holocaust. But it proved very helpful to me because, through the comparison of the pro and anti-holocaust views, I was able to gather more facts and arrive at some logical conclusions. Now I was in a position to analyze the matter with the help of arguments on both sides.

As I was coming out of the University’s gate, Sarah’s Battle Car passed by me. It halted at some distance ahead of me. As I went forward and looked inside the car through the window, I saw Sarah accompanied by a ripe aged woman who was giving a sweet smile. Perhaps, while I was going towards the car, Sarah had told her something about me. The woman looked towards me with a smile and remarked, “So this is the rebel of your class. He’s a very nice boy.”

Sarah smiled. “Hammad, she’s my Mama Mrs. Jenny Isaac.”

By the bowing of my head I saluted Mrs. Jenny and she responded with a smile.

“Where are you going? I’ll drop you there,” offered Sarah.

“Yes yes, come on with us. We’ll have a nice chat on the way,” remarked Mrs. Jenny.

“No thank you. I’m going to a library near Panorama Square. It’s there after the next signal. You may go.”

“No my dear. We won’t let you go so easily,” said Mrs. Jenny with a laugh. “We can allow you to go if you promise to have tonight’s dinner with us.”

Sarah also nodded her head. There was no way of escape for me and I promised to come to them at night.

CHAPTER 26

HATRED FOR THE WHOLE WORLD

Something strange happened to me after Abdullah's return that day. All of a sudden, I began to hate the whole world as an enemy. It appeared to me as if quite suddenly, my heart had lost all its good feelings. From the day when I had a meeting with Sufi Rehmatullah, till my last emotional encounter with Abdullah at the railway station, I had not missed even a single Prayer. But after Abdullah's return that day, my heart completely lost its faith in religion. My inside belief seemed to have perished and I no longer had any trust in the concept of prayers, supplications and their acceptance by God. To be very honest, every such thing began to look like farcical and deceptive. I stopped offering Prayers and all the time, I was obsessed with the idea that Prayers and supplications were absolutely useless, because, had they been of any use or value, God would have softened the Maulvi's heart for me and instead of being engaged to Abdullah, Iman would have been engaged to me. Whatever the Maulvi had said during his few meetings with me, appeared to me as a false show and hypocritical propaganda only intended to raise his stature as a pious man among others. I had a strong notion that he had deliberately rejected my love for his daughter only to make a show of his piety and righteousness to the people. I firmly believed that his only desire was not to see a reduction in the number of those who offered their Prayers behind him. I imagined that he wished that while he was passing through the streets and bazaars, people should stand up as a mark of respect for him and should praise his nobility and virtuousness in his absence. Thus, he always wanted to remain intoxicated with the idea of his greatness and piety. For most of the time, my mind was filled with such type of thoughts about the Maulvi. Perhaps, I had been deprived of the ability to have some positive thoughts. When I used to go to his mosque for offering the Isha Prayer, people used to discuss strange type of problems with him after the Prayer. For instance, one day, a young man told the Maulvi that he had been facing a strange [problem in his life. According to him, whenever he went away from his house for some work or whenever he went to some other city for his studies and lived in the hostel, he missed all his Prayers. Despite his earnest desire, he could not offer any Prayer, because the act of offering the Prayers only intensified his homesickness. As he believed that his Prayers would increase his sadness, instead of offering the Prayers, he used to go out with his friends and spent that time in watching movies and other such activities.

In the same way, one day another worried man came to the mosque and told the Maulvi that he did not like to go for Hajj in spite of the fact that he was strong and healthy and had all the financial resources to undertake the journey to Saudi Arabia for the sake of the pilgrimage. According to him, he did not have any responsibility which could prevent him and his wife from going for Hajj and yet, his heart was not inclined towards the performance of this important religious obligation. He confessed that his heart was utterly devoid of the love and longing for seeing the House of God.

In those days, I used to listen to all such problems with amazement. But even more astonishing were the replies which the Maulvi used to give. Thus, addressing the man who did not like to go to Hajj, he said, "You need not worry about this problem. Everything depends on the power or ability to do something good, which is only granted by God. The fact that you are worried about your lack of interest in Hajj is also an encouraging sign. Because something is better than nothing. So far, God has granted you the ability to feel worried about your indifference towards an important religious obligation. Whenever God grants you the ability to go for Hajj, you will automatically be filled with an intense love and desire for going there. However, you should continue to pray for the solution of this problem, because, if your heart is even deprived of your present anxiety about Hajj, that would be the most dangerous and most alarming situation.

Similarly, one day, I heard a strange thing about praying to god. A young man was complaining to the Maulvi that his prayers did not have the element of sincerity and his repentance and his act of begging forgiveness from God were also false, without any truth. According to him, his prayers and supplications were hypocritical because, while outwardly repenting for his sins, he was feeling an inward joy on committing those sins. He further remarked that on all such occasions, he could hear

his heart saying to him that if ever again he got the opportunity, he would again commit those sins without any hesitation or regret. In reply, the Maulvi repeated his lecture about the power or ability to do something, which is granted by God. "So far, you have been given the ability to beg forgiveness from God in a hypocritical and half-hearted manner, but at some proper time, the ability to pray for forgiveness in an earnest and sincere manner would also be granted to you. For the moment, you should continue your apparently false, pretentious and hypocritical repentance. Whatever may be the present nature of your remorse and prayers for forgiveness, you should not give them up because, the most dangerous situation will be that in which you are deprived of even this ability as well."

While recalling all such lectures of the Maulvi, I also had the feeling that the ability to think positively and do good deeds had been snatched away from me with my last meeting with Abdullah. In those days, I used to spend the whole time in the same blank and empty minded condition watching the various happenings of the world taking place in front of me. I had stopped going to Shakir's house and did not like to meet Ghafura and Khairu so frequently. Quite often in those days, when Mr. Siddiqi was fed up with waiting for me for a long time, he would himself come to the station and take me with him to his bungalow. All the people around me knew that something had happened to me, but nobody knew the cause of the drastic change that had occurred in me. Daily, in the early hours of the morning and at night, Khairu was ready with his tonga, hoping that I might once again go to the mosque in connection with my vow, without knowing that I had done away with all my vows. Previously, I used to pray most earnestly for the fulfillment of my desires regarding Iman. But now, everything was gone and above all, I had lost my faith in the fulfillment of vows and supplications. I had become totally indifferent to every joy and sorrow of the world. The date of Iman's marriage was drawing near and I was counting these days like a condemned prisoner who counts the remaining days of his life while languishing in a dark dungeon. It was a long, tiresome, exhausting and boring day. In the evening, I was waiting for the coming of the goods train at platform 2. Due to some reason, the train had been standing for a long time at the last gate. When I got tired, I sat down at the bench under the lamp post and started looking towards the signal in the direction from which the train was to enter the station. Ghafura was not there and I had to unload the entire luggage. As I looked down the signal across the railway tracks, I saw a man coming towards platform 2. He seemed to be a familiar figure. But who was he? With a sudden jolt, I returned to my senses. Oh it was Shakir, wearing the typical uniform of drivers, due to which, from a distance, I had thought him to be a railway employee. Shakir was coming towards me and I got up in nervousness. The moment he came close to me, he pressed me hard against himself and stood there for a long time in the same position without saying anything. When he finally left me, I saw tears in his eyes.

"O Mr. Hammad, is my house so inferior in your eyes that you didn't like to stay there even for a few days?"

"You know very well that I don't think like that. I regard your home as my second home. If I were to live at any home, why should I have left my first home? But who gave you my present address? I knew that Nighat won't be able to hide it for a long time."

"If I had so desired, I would have gone after you in search of you on that very first day when you came to us after leaving your home, but I didn't do so because I knew that you would mind it. Even today, I've come here after getting your address from Nighat. She most urgently wants you to meet her at the old Haveli. She says that there's something very important to talk about. You'll have to accompany me to my home at this very moment."

"At this very moment? But I've to do a lot of work at the station now and I can come to you in the evening."

"No no. You'll have to come with me right now. In case there had been no emergency, Nighat would never have given me your address. You know well that you can fully trust her."

There was so much urgency in Shakir's tone that I had to go with him after handing over the charge of unloading the goods from the train to another senior coolie present at the station. Shakir

knew very well that I would not like to sit in the Commissioner's car so he had brought an old Opal car belonging to someone else. Soon, we were on our way to the old Haveli. Shakir told me during the drive that my mother had been inwardly shattered due to my long absence from home. She had sent Ibad everywhere in search of me but as everyone at home was afraid of the Commissioner, no one ever openly talked about my absence. All of them knew that after leaving home, instead of living with some friend, I had been living somewhere alone. Mother had even asked Shakir to find out where I was living. At last, in order to console her, Shakir had to tell her about my well being and about my occasional visits to the old Haveli for meeting him and Nighat. She had told Shakir that if I ever came to the old Haveli again, he should secretly inform her or Ibad about my coming. For a moment, I nervously looked towards him. Was he inviting me to the old Haveli as a part of that secret programme? But then I condemned myself, because Shakir could never do such a thing. If he had such intensions, he would not have told me all these details. After a short while, we arrived at the gate of the old Haveli and he dropped me there. He himself went somewhere and promised to return soon after returning the car to its owner. It was about four-thirty in the evening. Silence prevailed in the Haveli and as soon as I entered through the gate, I saw Nighat anxiously strolling in the backyard waiting for me. The moment she saw me, she briskly came to me. "O Brother, where have you been so long? I've been waiting for you for several days. Today, I had to send father to bring you. Why didn't you come here to meet me? Have you broken off your ties with all of us?"

Her eyes were full of complaints and I gently slapped her on her head. "How clever you are. You knew that I would be angry with you on leaking out my address but before I could show my anger, you yourself became angry with me."

"Yes, there was something very serious. Otherwise, I wouldn't have given your address to anyone. The fact is that Haya wants to say something to you. She came here on a number of occasions but there was no news of your whereabouts. I had to tell her that if you came to us again, I would arrange her meeting with you on someday, but you didn't come here for so long. At last, I told Haya to come here today and for this very reason, I had to send Father to the railway station in search of you."

Haya's coming here was indeed a matter of great surprise for me. Apparently, she was an Innocent little girl. What did she want to say to me? How was it possible for her to come here from her cage-like home? I knew well that it must have been extremely difficult for her to come here alone from her home. "Where's Haya now?"

"I told her to sit in the round room in the large veranda. She arrived here shortly before you came. In a state of worry, I was strolling here and thinking that if you were not found at the station, what I would say to Haya. You can meet her in that room and I'll soon come there." For a while, I stood there in a state of confusion but then after thinking something, I called Nighat who was going to some other part of the Haveli. "But how was she able to come here alone?"

"She hasn't come here alone. Her mother is also with her. She is sitting with my mother."

Having said that, Nighat turned and went away while I became more confused and perplexed. If Haya has come here with her mother, does it mean that her mother also knows what she wants to say to me? While I was still absorbed in such thoughts, I reached the large veranda of the Haveli. For a moment, I stood at the door, trying to focus my thoughts in one direction and as I stepped into the room. Seeing me suddenly entering the room, Haya who became nervous for some time, stood up and said Salaam to me. For the first time on that day, I looked carefully towards her who had a striking resemblance with her elder sister Iman. She seemed to be two or three years younger than Iman. Like Iman's eye lashes, her eye lashes were also quivering all the time and like Iman, she was also wrapped in a large sheet and was standing there with her head bent. I gathered from her expressions that she had come there driven by the force of some unknown passion but finding me in front of her, she had lost her courage. In order to ease her tension, I had to start the conversation; otherwise, both of us might have stood there facing each other, without saying anything.

"Why are you standing, Sit down please."

She sat down silently and I too sat down on the sofa in front of her. "I'm sorry that you had to wait for me for some time. Only a short while ago, I was informed by Niggy about your coming here."

Haya raised her eye lashes and looked towards me. "Why are you punishing yourself?"

I didn't expect this direct question.

"Perhaps, this punishment was destined for me and who can fight against his fate?"

"I know that you are truly in love with Iman, but this type of love is now only confined to storybooks and romantic magazines. The world is now devoid of all those people who can understand this love."

In surprise, I looked towards that delicate flower-like girl who seemed to have returned from school or college only a short time ago. I didn't expect to hear such mature words from her. Perhaps, someone has rightly said that in their thinking girls are ten years ahead of their age.

"The problem is that it's not in a person's control to love or not to love someone. The greatest tragedy of love is that it is beyond human control. Moreover, true love never cares whether someone would understand it or not."

Haya was attentively listening to my words. "If only your marriage with Iman could be possible. But if it hasn't happened, it doesn't mean that you should abandon the whole world. This is the message that I've brought for you from Iman. Her last request to you is that for God's sake you should give up your present miserable life and return home."

So she had brought a message for me from her. It meant that she also had a heart that throbbed somewhere in her body. Perhaps, she had not yet forgotten my condition which she had seen at the railway station. How innocent some people are, who believe that others would forget everything. At least, that stone hearted lady took some pity on me and through a messenger sent me the message that I should forget my pain and my fanatical love. This gesture of hers was indeed an act of great kindness on her part.

"If your sister Iman wants me to return home to my relatives, do tell her that I've returned home. I don't want her to lead the rest of her life with the feeling that somebody became homeless because of her."

In a state of sudden shock, Haya looked towards me. "I knew you won't agree to my suggestion. But why do you wish to bear all the suffering yourself? Why do you intend to subject yourself to so much torture? Even at this time, you are worried about my sister's feelings. Do you think that she would believe me if I tell her that you have returned home?"

"Then do tell me what I can do to assure her."

"You don't seem to belong to this world. This world has not been created for people like you. But if it is possible for you, do consider my request sympathetically. It is not just my sister's desire; it is also my humble request to you. You can't imagine my condition when I saw you at the railway station that day. Mother also saw you for the first time that day. She also found you quite different from the whole world. If only you had never been overshadowed by our unlucky stars."

In the meantime, Nighat entered the room and told Haya that her mother was ready to leave. Haya stood up, begged leave from me and turned to go while I remained sitting silently at my place. Then all of a sudden, Haya stopped for a moment, came to me and gave me a wrapped piece of paper. It's a written message for you from my sister."

As Haya left the room, I still had that slip of paper in my hand. For a while, I could not understand what had happened. Nighat had also gone out to bid farewell to Haya. The delight of opening the beloved's letter and reading it is only known to those who have actually passed through this experience. Those few moments are no less than Caron's treasure for the lover. In my case, these were the first written words sent to me by my beloved and as far as other ordinary lovers are concerned, they always like to preserve all the words of their beloveds like some sacred relics, though they may have read and reread these words thousands of times. Daily, they read these words thousands of times and on each occasion; they seem to them as new as they were when they read

them for the first time. I was rapidly glancing over the page which had only a few sentences written in a beautiful style. Her letter was without the formal greetings and salutations.

“I have no doubts in my mind regarding your intentions and the greatness of your truth. I only want to say that love has no obstinacy because obstinacy is the sign of hostility. Please go back to your home and bring an end to this hostility. It is my first and last request to you.”

Perhaps in those few moments, I read that slip of paper dozens of times hoping each time that I might have skipped or misunderstood some word during the previous reading. In fact, for a long time, I could not believe that I had in my hands a written message from my sweetheart only for me, for Hammad Amjad Raza. Could there be a better excuse than this for continuing to live? I could see her picture reflected from every bit of that paper, from its each and every letter and from its each speck of ink. It was not just a piece of paper for me. I felt as if Iman herself had been sitting in front of me and talking to me. Instead of being a half meeting, that letter was more than a full meeting for me. As I looked around, I saw a few papers and a pencil lying on a nearby table. I picked up the pencil and jotted down a few lines on a paper. Ghalib was her favourite poet and during my visit to her home I had seen Ghalib's books there. I, therefore, wrote a few couplets of Ghalib in order to express my feelings for her. She had never been able to comprehend my words and I thought that she might understand my feelings through the words of her favourite poet. In these couplets, the poet says to his beloved that a lot of time is required for his passions to make an impact on her; and by the time she comes to know of his real feelings, he might be ruined.

On another paper, I wrote a message for Nighat that if Haya had not gone till then, she (Nighat) should convey my message to Iman through her or through some other source. I came out of the room after placing a small marble paper weight on both the papers. There was no one outside and I did not wish to stay there for a long time, because, Mother might have directed some other servant in the Haveli besides Shakir to inform her of my coming to this place. Passing through the Haveli's gate I came out on the main road. After walking for some distance, I found a tonga, sat on its back seat and told the driver to take me to the railway station. I was completely lost in the ecstatic thought that a piece of paper on which she had written something for me with her own hands was so close to me. While I was still pre-occupied with such thoughts, the tonga reached the station. It was getting late in the evening and as I reached the platform, I saw Mr. Siddiqi's Bengali cook wandering here and there in search of me. He was delighted to see me and came hastily to me. In his typical Bengali accent in which “S” is often pronounced as “Sh”, he told me that Mr. Siddiqi was waiting for me and that he had cooked rice and fish. I tried to make an excuse by saying that I was tired, but I knew that now, Ibrahim the cook would not go without me, because Mr. Siddiqi must have sent him with some firm instructions. I was compelled to accompany him to his Bungalow. Some chairs had been placed in the veranda and he was sitting on one of them. He was also delighted to see me. “So Mr. Hammad, now we can't see your face for the whole week.”

I smiled. “No sir, that's not the case. Whether I meet you or not, you are always with me.”

He laughed heartily and said, “You've never been short of words. At least, give someone the chance to be annoyed with you.”

Mr. Siddiqi went on talking about different matters and somehow or the other, I also continued talking to him just to please him, although my mind was somewhere else. In the meantime, Ibrahim served the dinner consisting of rice and fish. He always cooked very delicious rice and fish and while we were eating, he was always hovering around hoping to hear our words of praise for him. Man has always been hungry for the praise of his skill and talent and the same hunger can be traced in the history behind even the greatest successes of the world. The same hunger inspires everyone to do something wonderful, unique and different from others and under the influence of this inspiration, man was able to produce the greatest wonders of the world such as the Taj Mahal of Agra. I have always believed that if we had been devoid of this irrepressible desire for hearing our praise, we would still have been living in the Stone Age.

After the dinner, I begged leave from Mr. Siddiqi who accompanied me up to the small white wooden gate in the courtyard. As I was about to leave, he stopped me and kept watching me for some time, as if trying to explore something from my face.

“Life doesn’t come to an end with the breaking of one relationship and we don’t have the right to finish it alone. We can’t spend this brief life for ourselves. It is mostly spent for the sake of others and I know that you know well how to live for the sake of others.”

Mr. Siddiqi patted me on my shoulder and went back into the bungalow while I came out and noticed that the Cold Road looked desolate. At some distance from one another on the road, there were the lamp posts installed by the municipality. Their yellow lights could be seen scattered on the road in the form of circles. Someone has rightly said that these lights do not shorten our distance at night, but they make our journey easier. They are like good friends in whose company; even sorrowful times are spent joyfully. At that time, I was missing my old friend Kamran very much. Eversince I had left my home, I had been constantly informing him of the events of my life through letters, but after my last meeting with Abdullah, I had not been able to write any letter to him. While walking alone towards the platform, I was thinking about Mr. Siddiqi who had said something about living our life for the sake of others. It was quite astonishing for me that I was not the only being who was aware of the conditions of my life, all those who were around me, were fully aware of everything that was happening to me. Several people were worried only due to me. I must now move to some other city without telling anything to anyone. Why was I still in this city? There was nothing left for me to wait for. Why was I waiting for Iman’s marriage day when that story had totally ended for me? Something was bound to happen and there was no question of when it was to happen. My love was being plundered but still people like Mr. Siddiqi were expecting me to show the dignified behaviour of the captain of a sinking ship. The captain of a half broken ship knows very well that no power in the world would now be able to prevent the sinking of his ship. But even then, in order to boost the morale of his crew and passengers, he stands defiantly and courageously on the broken deck and is finally drowned with the ship. I did not know why the people around me had begun to believe that I possessed a similar courage and determination.

CHAPTER 27

THE JEWISH SETTLEMENT

In the evening, Kamran came back while I was getting ready to go to Sarah's home.

"What? Would you really go to that Jewish settlement? It's impossible."

"My dear, I'm not going to any Jewish settlement. I'm only going to Sarah's home, situated in the block at the back of the University."

"I know that place quite well and I call it a Jewish settlement. Before your coming to London, I went there twice in connection with your admission and all the residents were looking towards me in a contemptuous manner as if I were a drain worm and not a human being. None of them liked to talk to me in a proper way. You don't know how difficult it was for me to get the confirmation of your admission from that Isaac. I again advise you to give up the idea of going there."

With a smile, I patted him on his shoulder and got his car's keys from his hand. "Don't worry. Your friend won't prove to be a sweet pill for them to swallow." I'm only going there to meet Sarah and her Mama. My meeting with them would help me in the preparation of my term paper. I want to have a closer look at their life style."

Kamran heaved a long cold sigh. "Convey my greetings to that beautiful Jewish girl and tell her that in future whenever she invites you to dinner, she must also invite your bosom friend Kamran because in his absence, you can't have your meal properly."

At about eight, I arrived at sir Isaac's bungalow and was welcomed at the gate by Sarah, while Mrs. Jenny was in the lounge inside the house, but sir Isaac was not seen anywhere. Sarah's house had been elegantly decorated. The delicacy, decency and refined taste of the inmates of the house were evident from everything. The walls had been decorated with several paintings made by Sarah herself and in one corner of the house, there was a small room reserved for worshipping. A number of candles had been placed in a particular order and I concluded that the candles must have some religious connotation. Sarah became busy in making arrangements for the dinner while Mrs. Jenny sat beside me.

"Now, tell me something about your life. How were you able to reach this stage? I've heard many mysterious stories about your country and its people, but you don't seem to be so mysterious."

"I haven't got much to tell you about myself. Distances always give a mysterious look to things and people. But when we get closer to them, their mystery is gone. That's the reason I'm sitting before you today."

Sarah who was standing nearby and arranging the flowers in a flower basket, laughed to hear my words and addressing her mother she said: "Don't expect to hear from him the reply of any of your questions, because he is habitual of asking questions in response to the questions of others."

Mrs. Jenny also laughed and I told her briefly about my life. She heard everything very carefully. I asked her about sir Isaac.

"He'll be coming soon. It's time for his worship. The fact is that there is still some tension between him and Sarah due to the incident involving you that took place at the University and I think that by coming somewhat late today, he may try to show his annoyance with her."

In astonishment, I went on looking towards that honourable woman who had frankly told everything without hiding anything. Sarah must be the image of that truthful woman and just like her, she always had a clear heart and liked to speak the truth. Had there been someone else, he would have offered any excuse instead of telling the real inside story of his home.

"Oh, in that case, you shouldn't have invited me here tonight. My presence may further escalate the tensions between the father and the daughter."

"No, no such thing will happen. Sarah has told me a great deal about you and I myself wanted to see you. Sarah can never support a wrong man and my meeting with you has further convinced me of this fact."

After some time, wearing his traditional dress, sir Isaac also appeared from the back of the house. He was wearing a long gown, had a cap on his head and a big wooden rosary in his hands. With a

smiling face, he shook hands with me and for a while, we talked about the weather and other routine matters. Then, we were told by Sarah that the dinner was ready. It was indeed a very delicious dinner consisting of several dishes which Sarah and her mother had prepared with their own hands. Never before had I eaten some of these dishes. One of them was a special sweet dish made of dates. It had been boiled and filled in small pieces of pine apple and coconut. Similarly, there were salty sausages made of deer meat. There were a number of other such dishes which I was tasting for the first time. I highly appreciated the dinner and remarked to Mrs. Jenny that I couldn't believe that Sarah could cook such delicious dishes. In reply, Sarah only smiled. During the dinner, sir Isaac did not say anything to Sarah. After the dinner, Sarah and her mother went to the kitchen for preparing Egyptian coffee. I noted that Sarah and her mother were doing most of the work and the few domestic female servants only assisted them in serving the dinner and removing the dishes from the table afterwards. I had read somewhere that this is how the Jews show their respect for others. When Sarah and her mother went to the kitchen, sir Isaac and I were left alone at the dining table. He seriously looked towards me and began to speak.

"What about your term Paper? Is it ready? I expect you to prepare a good term paper which would always remain in the University's record."

I was expecting the same question from him. "Of course sir. I'll express my views about the topic in the form of my paper after a thorough research into the matter. I'm fully aware of its importance."

"You must have got considerable help from this university's library."

"Yes sir. Besides the library of this university, I've also benefited from other libraries of the city. Moreover, I've gathered all the relevant material available on the internet."

Sir Isaac, who seemed surprised at my reply, lifted his head. "From which books have you gathered your references?"

I mentioned the names of all the books published till that time on this subject, including the one written by David Wrong. His mood suddenly changed and he spoke in a somewhat bitter tone. "While writing on such important and sensitive issue, why did you consult such bogus and unauthentic books which were written without any research? If you needed some help, you should have talked to me and I would have told you about those books which are thousand times better than these books."

In the meantime, Sarah and Mrs. Jenny arrived back at the table with the coffee. Having observed her father's changed mood, Sarah said, "Papa, I believe that the matters pertaining to the university should be discussed at the university."

But sir Isaac's tone was still bitter. "It's not just the question of a term paper being written at the University. It's the question of our faith and our ideology. I can't allow anyone to propagate false and misleading views about this ideology, only to gain cheap reputation and to look more prominent among others."

"Sir, I've never done anything in my life to gain cheap reputation and to look more prominent among the people. Furthermore, I haven't yet submitted my paper and before that, how can you give any judgment about its authenticity? After submitting my paper, I would honestly and truthfully answer all your objections about it. Sir Isaac angrily heard my words and then left the room after making a false excuse that he was not feeling well. While he was going, he said to his wife in Hebrew that he believed that a wrong guest had been invited to his home. As a protest Sarah loudly said, "Papa!"

He went inside perhaps without knowing that I knew the Hebrew language. Sarah's face became red with rage and she angrily went towards the room where her father had gone. As I begged leave from Mrs. Jenny, she openly admitted that the atmosphere had become somewhat tense due to her husband's attitude. She tried to apologize to me for it but I at once stopped her from doing so.

"No don't worry. I've been much pleased to come here. Meeting you has been one of the most exciting experiences of my life and there's no need for any apology."

“I had thought that during your visit to our home, Isaac would get a chance to know something more about you and this might ease the tension between him and Sarah, but I was wrong to think like that. Throughout my life, I’ve never seen him behaving in such an indecent manner. He’s surely passing through some severe mental strain.”

I held Mrs. Jenny’s hand and stood up. She wanted to go out with me in order to say good-bye to me but I again stopped her. “We people don’t have the tradition of youngsters being embarrassed by the elders in such a manner.”

As I came out, I noticed a cold nip in the air and small particles of snow could be seen falling about here and there. I raised the collars of my jacket and began walking towards my car parked on the paved path made of bricks. I had hardly reached near the car when Sarah came running out of her house. In her hurry, she had not covered herself with some warm cloth and by the time she came close to me, she had started shivering with cold.

“How’s that? How did you come out without getting permission from me? I went inside for a while to talk to Papa and you came out so quickly?”

“You went inside so angrily that I didn’t hope to see you coming back so soon. Your Mama was unnecessarily apologizing to me and I thought it better to leave. However, I was thinking of giving you a late night call.”

Signs of embarrassment were visible on Sarah’s face. “I didn’t expect such an attitude from Papa. Please forgive me.”

I then realized that a delicate heart also throbbed in that courageous girl. As tears appeared in her eyes, I said, “Believe you me, I didn’t mind even a single word spoken by sir Isaac. People often become emotional about their views and ideologies. I never wanted to discuss this topic at this place but it was he who started this discussion and I had to answer him. But I want to assure you that you, your Mama and sir Isaac have become more respectable for me as a result of my visit to your home and I’m saying these words with all the sincerity of my heart.”

Sarah stood there silently for some time and I could very well imagine what a difficult moment it must have been for an honourable girl like her. The air was now blowing faster and snowfall had started and the silvery white snow could be seen falling on our head. I removed my jacket and put it on Sarah’s shoulders and scattered her hair. “Now, you must go inside the house. If something happens to you, sir Isaac would never allow me to enter the University.”

My words proved effective and I felt relieved to notice that the burden of her heart was lightened to some extent. She gently teased me and said, “I’ve now realized how you win over other people so easily but you must not forget that even now, I’m the greatest opponent of your views at the University and I’ll not admit my defeat so easily.”

I was sitting inside the car and smiling. After turning on the ignition, I held my head out of the window and replied, “At least you’ve admitted today that one day or the other, you’ll be defeated, if not so easily, it may be after a great deal of struggle and hardwork.”

With a smile, she bade farewell to me and while I was taking the car out of the gate of her palace like house, I looked into the backview mirror and saw her still standing there in snowfall and watching me while I was going. The snow was falling after touching her hair and slightly dimpled cheeks. She looked like a princess standing majestically in her empire. My car took a swift turn and I gradually drove away from her palace. In this dark night, the city of London and its roads looked deserted and empty. Covered with the quilt of white snow, my friend River Thames was also sleeping soundly. After telling long stories to one another, the tall trees on the roads seemed to have become silent and in amazement, they were watching the snow flakes busy in their mischievous acts. The joy of watching snowfall in a quiet night is only known to those who have witnessed this spectacular scene in a lonely and desolate place at night. It appears as if light is raining down on earth from the sky in the form of tiny snow flakes. The falling snow has its own white milky light and it seems that innumerable fireflies are showing you the way. A large number of such fireflies could be seen at that time hovering around my friend’s car. At that time, I was remembering a lullaby

that our grandmother used to sing to us during our childhood. In her sweet soothing voice she used to sing “All the stars and all the residents of palaces set out in search of the moon.”

My car was sliding on the road covered with white snow and I felt that I was also a star which had been wandering in search of its moon since times immemorial.

CHAPTER 28

THE LAST MEETING

Since morning that day, patches of clouds had been running after one another like naughty children. At last, the cold weather of September had set in, the heat of the sun had lost its intensity and the shadows had become long and cold. Finally, the mischievous patches of clouds caught one another and the whole sky was covered with dark clouds. When the first drop of rain kissed my forehead, I was unloading the luggage from the goods train that used to arrive at eleven. Heavy rain started in a few minutes and labourers began running here and there in search of some shelter from rain. Ghafura began calling me from a veranda which had a tin and wooden roof. He was urging me to come there to protect myself from the falling rain. I wonder why people like to hide from rains which wash away all the impurities of the body and the mind. In the meantime, from the last end of the platform, Mr. Siddiqi's servant was seen coming towards me. He had an umbrella and was taking long strides in the rain water that had already gathered there. He informed me that someone wanted to talk to me on the telephone in Mr. Siddiqi's office.

"Someone wants to talk to me?" I mumbled in astonishment. But there was no more time for further questions and answers and I went after him towards the office. With the signal of my hand, I told Ghafura from some distance that I was going to attend a telephone call. By the time I reached Mr. Siddiqi's office, I was completely wet with rain water. And before entering the office, I had to wipe off the rain water from the whole body. As I entered the office, I saw a number of visitors or passengers gathered around Mr. Siddiqi's table. He had two lines of the same number. One of the telephone sets was placed on his table while the other one lay on the head clerk's table in the same room. Most of his calls were received by his head clerk, but at that time, both telephone sets were lying silently on their cradles. As I looked enquiringly towards Bashir, without taking his eyes away from the files, Mr. Siddiqi remarked, "The call was becoming longer and I told the caller to call after some time. Sit down here; we may again receive the call at any moment."

I sat down in the chair in front of the head clerk's table.

"It was a girl's call," whispered Bashir into my ears.

In utter amazement, I looked towards him, but there was no information on his face except an innocent smile. Who could be this girl who was calling me at Mr. Siddiqi's number? Outside, it was raining cats and dogs and as far as I could see through the window, everything at the platform and the station seemed to have been washed by the shower of rain. With their black umbrellas, people were hurriedly going about here and there. In the morning some people had closely watched the changing weather and were expecting heavy rain. They had come out of their homes wearing long overcoats. Now, with the raised collars of their overcoats, they were looking towards, hoping to be praised for their ability to foresee this heavy rain. Then suddenly, the telephone bell rang. I was so much lost in my thoughts that I almost jumped from my seat. Bashir attended the call.

"Yes, he's here. You can talk to him."

I got the receiver from Bashir.

"Hello, it's Hammad speaking."

A soft and delicate voice was heard from the other side. "Hello,"

"Who's on the line?"

"I'm Haya."

I almost dropped down the receiver. Was it really Haya calling to me in this heavy rain?"

"But how did you get my number? I mean is everything O.K.?"

Haya seemed to be somewhat worried and in some hurry. "Yes, all is well. Can you come to the old Haveli at four this evening?"

"Old Haveli? Yes, I'll surely be there. But----"

"Don't ask any questions. With a great deal of difficulty I'm talking to you from our neighbour's house. I only want to convey the message to you from my sister Iman that you must be there at the

right time. It's most urgent. Do come at four and the rest of the discussion will take place there. Good-bye."

"Iman's message? O my God! What was that girl doing? Was Iman also coming to the old Haveli that evening? In order to stop her I said, "Hello, please listen to me."

But the line had been dropped from the other side. A violently fast torrent of rain struck against the window with a fierce gust of wind which forced open the window and several things in the room became wet with the rain water. Bashir at once shut the window while I still sat silently. What did Haya actually want to say? Why had Iman invited me to the old Haveli that evening? Was she herself really coming to the Haveli? But how's it possible? She's going to be married after three weeks. How can she leave her home in such circumstances? But then why did Haya call me to the old Haveli and say that there was Iman's message for me? Iman might have sent a message for me in response to Ghalib's couplets which I sent to her.

A few days ago, Mr. Siddiqi had allotted to me a small wooden hut having a tin roof, situated at the end of a road covered with trees at the back of the station. A long time ago, several such huts had been built for the unmarried railway officials. When one of these huts became vacant, it was temporarily allotted to me by Mr. Siddiqi. After attending the telephonic call, I got up from Bashir's table and quietly went to my hut, where I sat for a long time, while the rain drops falling on the tin roof were producing a typical musical sound. It appeared as if rain had decided to fall that day with all its force and intensity. Had it been some other day, I would surely have enjoyed this rain and the musical sound produced by it on the tin roof. During my childhood, whenever there was such heavy rain, Kamran and I used to rush to my grandmother's tin roofed room in her Haveli. There, by banging the table, we used to make unsuccessful attempts to mould the sound of the rain or hailstones falling on the roof into various musical tunes. Along with this sound, we used to sing loudly all the favourite songs of our childhood. But while sitting in my hut that day, my whole attention was focused on Haya's telephone call. The next few hours were spent in the same process and I was suddenly roused from my day dreaming when the large clock at the station struck three.

Oh! By now, I must have left the station. I wondered whether I would get some conveyance or not in this downpour. As I looked around, I saw my only shirt and pants hanging in my room. As usual, Ibrahim the servant had got them washed and ironed from the railway washerman. I quickly changed my dress but then I laughed at myself. I had removed my wet uniform but I did not have an umbrella to protect my pants and shirt which I was wearing now. Anyhow, there was no time left for me to look for some umbrella. I swiftly came out of the room and walking under the cover of trees, reached the platform. On account of the heavy rain, there was nobody there. After coming out of the main building of the station, I looked around in search of some conveyance. The few tongas and taxis that passed by, had passengers in them. Khairu was also not seen there. Instead of standing there and wasting my time, I thought it better to walk on the long road in the hope of finding some conveyance. Rain was continuously piercing into my whole body. Although I was quite away from the station, I had not yet found any conveyance and I became apprehensive that I would not be able to reach the old Haveli at the appointed hour, because it was already 3-30 and I was still in the city. I was bitterly angry with myself for not coming out of the station earlier. But then, all of a sudden, Nature had some mercy on my helplessness and frustration. After crossing the Litton Road, I had now entered the cantonment area and was about to reach near the Staff College Road, when I suddenly saw a tonga which was perhaps going back after dropping some military passengers at the Staff College. I at once signaled the tonga driver to stop, put my hand into my pocket brought out all the money I could find, gave it to the driver and told him to take me to the old Haveli within the shortest possible time. He at once spurred the horse and with a great speed, the tonga started running on the paved road which had been washed by the rain shower. On account of the dark clouds, there already prevailed the late evening darkness and in that situation, whenever there was a blaze of lightning, it appeared as if someone had whitewashed the whole atmosphere for a moment. As the clouds were thundering loudly in the continuous downpour, the galloping horse was soaking wet

with the rain water; and as it snorted in excitement, it produced clouds of hot steam in the air. After leaving the paved road, the horse was now on its way to the old Haveli, passing through the puddles of rain water on the unpaved wet ground. The tonga driver did full justice to the large sum that I had paid to him as fare and dropped me at the gate of the old Haveli at exact four. Another tonga was already standing there and it seemed that some other passengers had also come there a short while ago; but in view of the hostile weather, they had told the tonga driver to stop there and take them back after some time. The driver of my tonga offered that he could wait for me for some time and take me back if I so desired. I accepted his offer and told him to wait for me. As both the tonga drivers got busy in talking to each other, I opened the wet wooden gate of the Haveli and went in. A strange type of sadness and silence prevailed in the whole atmosphere. All of a sudden, the Haveli's old watchman Allah Bakhsh appeared from somewhere and after saying Salaam to me, informed me that Nighat had just gone towards the round room. All the old servants of the Haveli had witnessed my childhood and perhaps, all of them knew my secrets. All of them knew about my leaving the home and my occasional visits to the old Haveli to meet Shakir and Nighat. They also knew that my family members were unaware of my coming to the old Haveli, but none of them had ever informed my father or mother about it. Perhaps, by doing so, they had endorsed my decision to leave my home. After meeting Allah Bakhsh, I went towards the courtyard, at the end of which there was the veranda. During the summer season, a number of large wooden reed screens were spread in front of the veranda. But now, all the reed screens had been folded up and tied to a strong rope hanging in the veranda. The dust coloured water was speedily flowing down from the drain pipes built on the rooftop of the veranda. Passing through the small mud brick drains, the water was going into the flower beds. With the exception of the sound of the falling and flowing of water, everything seemed silent and still. As I turned towards the round room in the veranda, I saw Haya wrapped in a white sheet standing in one corner. She was standing with her hands outstretched in an attempt to catch the spray of water falling down from the drainpipes built on the rooftop of the veranda. On seeing me, she immediately pulled back her hand and greeted me with Salaam. I went to her and said, "How did you reach here in this weather? Is everything all right?"

She gave a gentle smile. "Even in ordinary fine weather, we are unable to leave our home. But the four lines written by you forced us to come here. You left us with no other option."

I was rather confused by her reply. "I couldn't understand what you mean."

Then suddenly, I thought of Nighat. "Where's Nighat? What are you doing here alone?"

With her typical mischievous expression in her eyes, she pointed towards the room. "I'm not alone. Go to that room and meet her."

In a state of surprise and confusion I went towards the room. If Nighat had been inside the room, why was Haya standing alone in the dripping rain in the veranda? Perhaps, the supply of electricity had been disconnected shortly after the start of the rain and there was only the light of a few candles in the room. As I opened the door, I could see nothing in the darkness. But then, with a loud thunder of clouds, there was a flash of lightning and for a moment, everything became bright. There was some movement in a silky body that could be seen shrinking beside the wall in one corner of the room. With the flicker of the flame of a candle placed on a nearby mantelpiece, the same strand of hair became visible on her forehead and the whole room became bright with her light. It was Iman. Of course, it was Iman. Stunned by this wonderful miracle, I stood outside the door for a while in a state of disbelief, trying to convince myself that it was not a dream. I thought that it must have been a dream because since ages, my fate had not been so kind to me. But it was Iman, clad in a simple white dress and covered in a black shawl. Perhaps, Iman and Haya had come there in the other tonga that stood outside the Haveli but moisture produced by the rain drops could still be seen in her hair and on the forehead and even in the lock that hung along her forehead. Sitting in one corner of the room, she was as usual, scratching the carpet with the nails of her delicate feet. With her lowered head, she greeted me with Salaam. For a few moments, I stood dumbfounded and speechless. Then,

after a great deal of effort, I was able to utter a few words. "You? Here? Just a minute please, it will take me some time to believe that I'm really so fortunate."

I noticed a red line of modesty moving across her face. Then, she lifted her head and looked towards me. She wanted to say something but finding me wet in rain, she became rather worried. "Oh, you are terribly wet. I'll ask Nighat to arrange some towel for you."

She tried to stand up, but I interrupted her talk because I was afraid that if once she left the room, this most delightful dream of my life would be shattered. "Please remain sitting, I'm all right, and everything will dry up in a few minutes time. Don't go anywhere please."

I quickly moved away from the door and went near her. She was about to stand up but again sat down. Now, she was only at a distance of two steps from me and I could feel the trembling of her body. I sat there near her and felt how she was shrinking with modesty and shyness. I wondered whether she was a girl or a bunch of flowers. For the next few moments, she sat there silently with her bowed head, making unsuccessful attempts to control the trembling of her body while I continued watching her without winking my eyes as the interval of winking the eyes seemed quite odious to me at that time. She was sitting in front of me and I could not decide whether to watch her or talk to her. Never in my life had it been so much difficult for me while talking to someone. The silence existing between us was only broken by the rain that was pouring down outside. It seemed as if both of us had a burning desire to speak out the tumultuous passions of our hearts but we had suddenly lost all of our words. Then, with her dainty hands, she took out a wrapped piece of paper on which I had written a few couplets of Ghalib and sent to her. I knew that Nighat would surely convey it to her.

"What a strange thing you wrote to me. I only requested you to give up your obstinacy and go home. Why don't you agree to do what I want you to do?"

She became a bit emotional while speaking. As I looked towards her carefully, she looked much weaker than before. Her face had turned pale and blue veins were vividly visible on the back of her delicate hands. "You seem to be ill. Are you all right?"

She cast a wounded look on me. "I've come here to get a promise from you that you would no more torture yourself. You can't imagine my plight when I saw you at the railway station as a coolie. I bitterly condemned myself for everything that had happened. If you hadn't seen me, nothing of this sort would have happened."

"For God's sake, don't say so. Seeing you has been the most fascinating accident of my life and Loving you has turned out to be the most blissful experience of my apparently meaningless life. This love enabled me to recognize myself, otherwise, I would have departed from the world, without the joy of self-recognition. Now, I've got no complaints about my life and now, I'm even ready to welcome death with open arms."

She was shocked to hear my words. "Why do you say such things? Why do you degrade me in my own eyes again and again? Why?"

Before the completion of her sentence, she burst into tears, but before her two large tears could fall down on the ground, I bent forward and caught them in my palms. Then, under the force of some indescribable passion, I held her soft velvet hands into my own hands. There was another burst of thunder outside and the rain further intensified. While the skies were weeping outside, tears were raining down from our eyes inside the room. As soon as I caught her hands, a huge torrent of tears streamed out of my eyes. Instead of consoling her, I myself was weeping with the storm of tears bursting out of my eyes. I was holding her soft hands while she sat with her bowed head. Could there be a more blessed moment than this for breathing one's last and leaving this world? With her wet eyes, she looked towards me and it was for the first time that I got a chance to observe her bewitching beauty from so near. Nothing was lacking in her beauty and her whole structure seemed to be the master creation of a master painter. Her star like forehead, her large black eyes, her thin elegant nose, the curve of her chin and her delicate lips like red rubies, were all unique and

marvelous. There was a strange radiance on her face. With my fingers, I wiped away the tears from the tips of her eyes. She again spoke in a low tone. "Would you accede to my request, Hammad?"

For the first time, she called me by my name and never in my life had I felt my name to be so sacred, respectful and dreamful as I did at that moment.

"If it can give you some pleasure, I'll do it as well for your sake."

She gently pulled away her hands from my grip, untied her head cover took out something from it and put it in her fist. As she opened her fist before me, I saw in it those two shining pearls which I had sent back to her through Nighat. "They are yours. You were insisting that I should personally return them to you. Today, I've fulfilled this desire of yours. Keep them with you. I've got nothing else to present to you."

While she was uttering these words, she again burst into tears and hid her head in her knees. I was at a loss to understand how to console her, because she looked more wounded than I was. I got the pearls from her touched them with my eyes, kissed them and put them in my pocket.

"Please Iman, stop crying. These two pearls are more precious for me than all the blessings of this universe. What else can a person give to another? Honestly speaking, my love now seems something disdainful to me. It has taught me how to weep but today, it has also filled your eyes with tears. I'm very bad indeed and much worse is my love."

Shocked by my words, she lifted her head and unintentionally gripped my hand, as if she had not liked my words and wanted me to stop saying such things.

"Don't talk like that. If someone is to be blamed, it's me. If someone is to be condemned, it's me. Alas, I couldn't give you anything in response to your love. You can't imagine Hammad, how helpless and powerless I am. Throughout his life, my father has never seen any real joy. While Haya and I were still very young, our elder brother suddenly fell ill and passed away. Till this day, Father has not been able to forget that grief. But he arranged for me and Haya every worldly comfort and convenience which a child can be desirous of. He himself continued to wear patched clothes but never allowed our dresses to become dirty. After our brother's sad demise, Father pinned all hopes on me, arranged for me worldly and religious education at home and provided me all the required books. He takes maximum delight in discussing various problems with me. I am his day, his night and his whole world. Even the slightest blemish on my character can take his life. He was much perturbed by your stormy love and hastily arranged my marriage; otherwise, he wanted me to get further education and had sent my B.A. admission. But everything was swept away in your fanaticism, infatuation and craze." As she spoke, she looked like a marble statue and I listened to her dumbfounded. "Do you also regard my love, infatuation and craze as false?"

Iman tightened her grip on my hands and I felt that by clasping my hands, she would squeeze out my soul. "In the beginning, when you invited me to this Haveli through Nighat, I really disliked this whole affair very much. Till that time, like my father, I also strongly despised all such things. Your entire struggle to gain my attention appeared to me as a frivolous attempt by an aristocratic young lad to get cheap entertainment and amusement at the expanse of a poor innocent girl. Later, when your family members humiliated my father with their disparaging remarks, I was heart broken to think that they had punished us for something wrong done not by us but by you. Later, when I came to know from Nighat that you had abandoned your home, I considered it to be an emotional decision taken in a temporary fit of passion and thought that you would return home after a few days. Afterwards, I noticed that my father often remained worried. Since the day you came here with your marriage proposal till now, I haven't seen him sleeping peacefully. He is often seen walking throughout the night. My mother is a simple woman who can only share her husband's sorrow by weeping. Later, Abdullah informed me of your regularly coming to the mosque. But quite surprisingly, he has never used any harsh words for you, despite knowing everything. I couldn't believe that a person can renounce the whole world for the sake of someone whom he hasn't met properly even twice. But at last, the same thing happened which my heart had been refusing to admit till that day. The sight of you as a labourer at the railway station suddenly altered the course of my

life, smashed all my pride and changed all my previously held views about love. Your love came like a violent storm and penetrated into the innermost cores of my heart, after breaking open all its locks. I couldn't do anything. On that day I realized that in some remote corner of my heart, I had been nursing this love since that day when you blocked my way in the library of this Haveli. But perhaps, till that time, I was unaware of the force of this passion and could not recognize it. But then came that railway station episode which almost killed me and since then, I haven't been able to enjoy even a single peaceful moment. I always think that love is a strange passion that transforms an emperor into a beggar and a beggar into an emperor within no time. It is an invisible pain that continuously pierces into the heart with each and every breath. How helpless and powerless I've become under the force and pressure of this passion, you can't simply imagine it."

Full of astonishment, while I was listening to her, she seemed to me some princess of the fairyland and whatever she was saying, resembled some tale of the Arabian Nights. Within these few moments, my apparently worthless love had suddenly become credible and my wild goose chase had assumed glory and become meaningful. She continued her discourse, "The two couplets that you sent to me proved to be the last nail in the coffin. Previously, I had decided never to meet you and never to reveal to you the true condition of my heart, because, any such meeting would only be an exercise in futility. But those two couplets revolutionized my whole inside being and tears spontaneously gushed forth from my eyes. Someone inside me was loudly shouting to me that I must not let you go without saying something to you, because it would amount to an insult of your immortal love. This is how I decided to meet you for the first and last time. There was another flash of lightning outside and inside the room there was some light for a moment which enabled me to notice the frozen dew on her quivering lips. She informed me that the Maulvi had gone outside the city for two days in connection with some urgent piece of work and this gave her a chance to arrange the meeting. After getting the station Master's phone number from Nighat, she sent Haya to the neighbour's home in order to call me and invite me to the Haveli that evening. She further stated that she alone knew what an uphill task it had been for her to reach the Haveli in that inhospitable weather. If Haya and Nighat had not assisted her in this adventure, she would not have been able to meet me. I could now very well imagine the traumas through which she had been passing during the [past few weeks. The constant emotional strain and stress had wrecked her to such an extent that time and again, she was out of breath while talking. I bitterly scolded myself for having dragged that simple, innocent and flower-like girl on the thorny path of love. The deadly venom of love had penetrated into her whole existence. But I was even more critically wounded than her. But who was to blame for the whole tragedy? Of course, it was love that had ruined both of us. But love cannot be described as the real culprit. The real culprit was He who sowed the seed of love in our hearts, and nourished its venomous offshoots to such a degree that their deadly poison had now thoroughly devastated both of us and brought us to the point of death. Of course, the real culprit was He who creates the passion of love in the hearts of weak human beings and then amuses Himself watching its fatal impacts on them. Iman was still crying. "I know that by confessing my love, "I've committed a cardinal sin today. I fear that God may never forgive me for this sin, because love without any lawful relationship becomes a sin. But my Creator is also aware of the fact that I was left with no alternative other than meeting you. I couldn't see you ruining yourself for my sake. Perhaps, the rest of my life would be consumed in begging forgiveness for this sin. But I want you to make a solemn commitment with me that you would no more torture yourself for the sake of your love for me. It's our last meeting but I'm sure that you won't let this first and last real meeting with you to end up in vain. It is my earnest desire that if ever again your name comes into prominence in any context, it should not be accompanied by all such self-annihilating and self-destructive ideas. For the sake of my happiness, I've come here to ask for your happiness."

In a state of shock, I looked towards her. "If you had asked for my life, I would have readily given it to you because it's in my power, but don't ask me to do something which I'm myself powerless to do."

“Why? Isn’t it possible to spend the few remaining years of this brief life relishing the memories of this joyful meeting? I’m confident that I’ll certainly be with you in the next world, if not in this world.

The confidence and conviction of that ravishing girl made me virtually speechless for a while. I could very well imagine the crippling trauma through which she was passing at that moment. I knew that she was being torturously pricked by her conscience for doing something which she regarded as a grave sin; and in this state of utter helplessness, she won’t be able to express her love freely. In those few moments, the concept of divine punishment and reward in the light of sinful and virtuous deeds seemed to me as something most abominable and most detestable. I had a feeling that religion was once again ruthlessly plundering my love.

There was no let up in the heavy rain outside and the rain drops were continuously falling on the rooftop in a rhythmic manner. Inside the room, there were the quivering shadows of the candles trying to diffuse the impact of the advancing darkness. In this dream-like atmosphere, she was sitting with me with her folded knees, looking extremely restless tense and upset. Her strand of hair had become wet and had once again descended on her cheeks. In this state of ecstasy and under the force of an uncontrollable passion, I removed the lock from her cheek and placed it back on her forehead. In extreme nervousness she looked towards me and almost bent due to shyness and modesty. Then, she looked towards the old wall clock and almost jumped up in confusion.

“O my God! It’s too late. I must be on my way back before it’s too dark outside. Mother must be terribly worried about us at home as we’ve never been away from home for so long.”

I felt as if I had been suddenly stabbed by someone. So at last, this most fascinating dream of my life was about to be over. Iman was going and when I requested her to stop for a while, she revealed her helplessness in the form of tears. I knew that she won’t be able to stop any more. If Nature had taught us some means of halting the flow of time, I would surely have earned a few more moments in exchange for all the blessings of the heavens and the earth. Someone came outside the room and gently knocked at the door. As Iman immediately picked up her black shawl, Nighat and Haya momentarily appeared at the door and then disappeared. They had also come there to make us realize the swift passage of the murderous time. Iman anxiously looked towards me. “I’m waiting for your promise.”

I helplessly looked towards her. While leaving my home, I also made some promises with the members of my family and I must honour them, lest someone should cast doubts about the truth of my love. But you may go home without any tension and I’ll do whatever you wish. I only want some more time lest I should be degraded in my own eyes.”

Iman shook her head. “No, it will never happen.”

Now she looked somewhat calm and relieved. “I know you would never disappoint me.”

As she turned to leave, I was seized by an overwhelming desire to clasp her in my arms forever. Having reached near the door, she again turned around and saw me. Despite her enormous self-control, tears again appeared in her large black eyes. For a moment, we saw each other and then she went out of the room. With all my restlessness, I ran after her. Nighat and Iman were already present in the veranda waiting for her. Seeing tears in her eyes, both of them were on the verge of breaking down but as they saw me, they at once wiped away the tears from their eyes with their head cover. With her bowed head, Haya was standing with Iman in front of me. Apparently, I was a stranger for her but with all her sincerity, she had done for me whatever she could do. It was she, who had enabled me to have that rare meeting with Iman, despite all the obstacles and difficulties. Quite involuntarily, I placed my hand on her wet head. Feeling the pressure of my hand on her head, she was startled and noticing my hand on her head, she couldn’t control herself and burst into tears. I pressed her head against my shoulder and tried to console her. Perhaps, the entire universe was shedding tears at that time. Outside the veranda, the skies were shedding tears while inside the veranda, tears were gushing forth from the eyes of Nighat and Haya. The tonga driver blew the horn and Iman rushed towards the gate. But while she was on her way, she was repeatedly looking

towards me with her tearful eyes. Standing at the gate with her dazzling beauty, she cast a final glance on my ill fated face and then vanished forever, like the moon which shines for a while in the sky and then disappears into a cluster of dark clouds. I sat down on my knees in the veranda and wished to cry and shout so loudly as to smash up the heavens and the earth.

After Iman's departure that day, I realized that in case of true love, the agony of meeting the beloved is always much more severe and vicious than the pain and suffering of not being able to meet her. The fire of love instead of dying down further flared up in my heart after my last meeting with her. It seemed to me that everything would be burnt to ashes in this violent and uncontrollable fire. I had promised with Iman to return home to my family but I had not yet decided how to fulfil that promise. Sometimes, I thought of leaving the city permanently after conveying a false message to Iman through Nighat that I had returned home. Nighat was the only link between me and her and I knew that she (Nighat) would agree to tell this lie to her for my sake, as it might prove to be our last lie. But then, this very idea made me ashamed of myself. How could I tell a lie to her who had put at stake all the valuable assets of her life and come to me to honour my love and in the hope that I would surely do what she wanted me to do. I was at a loss to understand what to do. The more I thought about the matter, the more confused I became. She had asked me if it was not possible to spend the whole life relishing the memories of just one meeting. Now I thought that such a thing was possible but for this purpose, it was necessary to deprive me of all my senses and my memory immediately after that one meeting. After that meeting, my memory was proving to be my worst enemy. Even after the passage of one week, I could still imagine her sitting in front of me. I could still feel her familiar fragrance in my breaths and hear her sweet melodious voice and the jingle of her bangles echoing in my ears. What a strange and wonderful meeting it was which had made me utterly forgetful of all the happenings of my previous life. I had forgotten all my likes and dislikes, all my feelings, tastes and sensations and in fact, the whole of my existence and even my shadow which I had prior to this meeting. It appeared to me as if I had come into existence and perished during that single day when I had my last meeting with her.

It was perhaps the ninth day after my meeting with Iman. In these early October days, the sun had started setting early and before the setting of the sun, the golden sunshine seemed pleasantly warm in the slightly cold atmosphere. This golden colour of the sun was gradually increasing with the advancing cold weather. For a long time that evening, I had been sitting in that particular corner of the platform from where I could see the sun finally setting behind a mountain that stood in front of me. Then suddenly, I saw Shakir coming towards me. In those days, for some unknown reason, whenever I saw an old acquaintance of mine, my heart was filled with strange fears and apprehensions. Shakir did not stay with me for a long time that evening. He had come to deliver Nighat's letter to me. Talking about the members of my family, he told me that Mother had been completely devastated inwardly because of my prolonged disappearance from home. She had several heated discussions with the Commissioner about me. By now, all the members of my family had come to know that instead of shifting to Karachi or Islamabad, or going to Kamran in London, I had been living somewhere in Quetta. Someone who had seen me might have informed me about my presence in the city. But I knew very well that they must have gone in search of me in the five star hotels and main guest houses of the city, because, they could have never imagined me working at the railway station as a coolie. While leaving, Shakir said, "O Mr. Hammad, by kicking away all the material pleasures and comforts of life, you've assured your family and the whole world of the greatness of your passion. Now, I humbly request you not to refuse to go home if the members of your family want to see you back with them. Nighat remembers you a lot. She's going to be married next month and if it's possible for you, please come to see her once before her marriage. Now I beg your leave."

After hugging me, Shakir went away and I opened Nighat's letter, each and every word of which indicated that it must have been written in a state of intense agony and pain.

“My dear brother, I knew very well that no one would be able to stand against your passions. What seemed to be impossible has now become possible only due to the force of your crazy love. Even a girl like Iman had to yield before your passion. I’ve always been and shall always be proud of you. Iman is a delicate and innocent girl and, therefore, I request you to pray for her, because I know that your prayers never go ungranted. Since her meeting with you, she has been burning with fever and her condition is worsening all the time. Her mother thinks that the fever has resulted from her becoming wet in the cold rain water but I firmly believe that it is the outcome of the intense passion of love that you have awakened in her heart. It’s for the first time that she has experienced this passion because till now, she has been quite unaware of any such passion. I didn’t want to tell you about Iman’s deteriorating condition because she strictly prohibited me from doing so. But Haya has urged me to tell you everything and requested you to pray for Iman’s recovery. May all your sorrows be given to me and may you get all my joys.”

Sisters are indeed quite innocent creatures who cannot understand the simple fact that somehow or the other, all of us have to endure the pains and sufferings of our share in this world. I was much worried by Nighat’s letter. Haya was expecting me to pray for her sister without realizing that if my prayers had been so powerful and effective, Iman would have surely become mine. In those agonizing and painful moments, I wished to have wings in order to fly to her in the twinkling of an eye. Moreover, I was extremely angry with myself because it was I who had filled her veins with the deadly poison of love; and quite surprisingly, people were expecting me to provide some antidote for it. It is true that love descends upon the body like a pleasant pink weather but gradually, this weather is transformed into a violent and destructive fire which burns into ashes all the fragrant flowers and beautiful butterflies. Furthermore, the scorching heat of religion was also quite sufficient to burn the whole existence of that delicate innocent creature. Her sense of guilt on talking to a stranger was enough to keep her in a constant state of agony throughout the rest of her life. The effect of this heat was redoubled by the fire of love and I could very well imagine its accumulated impact on her. I knew that her whole existence was being roasted up in this war of love and religion. Religion was pulling her towards Maulvi Alim while love was pushing her towards me. In this tug of war, her fragile body was being shattered into bits and her soul was being fragmented. I was still unable to understand why religion has always been against such love. If this type of love is a sinful crime, why does this crime bring joy and pleasure for the lovers instead of sorrow, fear and sense of remorse and regret? Why do the lovers wish to commit this crime again and again? I believe that whenever we commit a sin, we are filled with remorse although for a few moments. But the sin of love is strange because, with every passing moment, it appears as more charming and more beautiful than before. Instead of bringing death for the lovers, it always infuses a new spirit into their bodies. If it is the case, should I conclude that the religious formula or interpretation of love has always been wrong? On one hand religion teaches us to love our fellow human beings, animals, plants, flowers and even the insensate objects but on the other hand, it describes as a sin even that form of love in which the lovers only wish to see and talk to each other. Why is this contradiction? Religion regards this form of love as a sin because it is apprehensive that at some later stage, when the lovers get some moments of solitude, they may be overpowered by low and vulgar passions. But if physical satisfaction has never been among the priorities of some lovers, can their love become acceptable to religion? If not, why not? Instead of trying to restrict love, religion should only try to restrict the passion that is born out of love. I was utterly unable to understand the religious philosophy about love. It was love that had brought me closer to religion. But now when religion was preventing me from love, I was naturally drifting away from religion. I believed that religion was directly responsible for the present pathetic condition of Iman. In this miserable situation, I wished to go to Maulvi Alim, fall down on his feet and request him not to erect the wall of religion in the path of our love and instead of shackling our feet with the chains of religion, he should enable us to enjoy love and allow our affairs to be decided by love and not by religion. But I was completely helpless. All I could do was to make desperate attempts to fight against the onslaught of such thoughts. Days were

passing by and Iman's marriage was only two days away. If Iman had permitted me to make another request to the Maulvi, I was even prepared to hang myself to death in front of his mosque, in the hope that it might eventually soften his heart for me. But she had imposed further restrictions on me. By mentioning her own honour and chastity and the compulsions of her poor father, she had virtually fettered my mad love for her. If she had not said such things, I might have gone to the Maulvi's house with a beggar's cup and banged my head against its walls, hoping that he might be persuaded to hold my wounded head into his own hands to provide me some comfort and relief. But alas, I could not do any such thing.

It was another sad October evening. The redness of the twilight in the sky resembled the blood oozing out of my wounded desires. The air was cold and signs of autumn were vividly visible on the platform. After turning yellow and then red, the mulberry leaves were falling down on the ground like stray kites. The platform seemed to be covered with a sheet of yellowish red leaves. Sitting on a bench placed on the same sheet under the lamp post, I was thinking that within two days, Iman would be married to Abdullah and would leave her home with him. Nighat had informed me that the Maulvi had decided to send Abdullah and Iman to her sister in Mach after their marriage. He had even arranged some job for Abdullah in Mach. There are several coal mines in Mach and around these mines; there are a number of small settlements for the coal miners. Abdullah's name had been approved as the Imam (Prayer leader) for a mosque of one of these settlements. I strongly believed that the Maulvi had made all these arrangements because of me, otherwise, how could he live away from her dear daughter? Nighat further informed me that after Iman's marriage, the Maulvi himself would not stay in Quetta for a long time, because he had made up his mind to shift to Mach along with his wife and Haya some time after Iman's marriage. Once again, my heart was filled with bitter hatred for religion which, after brutally murdering my love, did not even like to see its corpse being buried in this city. Then, the flow of my thoughts turned towards Abdullah and I began to envy his fate. How fortunate he was because very soon Iman would belong to him. Fortunate indeed are all those lovers who are crowned with success in their love. I began to imagine the condition of those who are so close to achieving their goal in love. If I had been in Abdullah's place, my heart would surely have burst and I would have died with delight before the blissful moment of the fulfillment of my love. Gradually, my thoughts about Abdullah became so powerful that I saw him coming towards him on the platform. I attempted to brush aside all such thoughts but I could still see Abdullah rapidly advancing towards me. I stood up in a state of bewilderment and noticed that it was none other than Abdullah, who was trampling the red and yellow dry leaves on the ground and briskly coming towards me with a much perturbed look on his face. I could not even walk a few steps towards him. Instead, standing silently, I simply saw him coming towards me. As soon as he came near me, he spoke in a hurried and breathless tone, "You'll have to come with me at once."

In utter nervousness I looked towards him. "But where?"

"To our home. Don't ask too many questions. Hurry up."

Abdullah's condition at that time did not allow me to ask any other question. As he turned, I followed him like an enchanted or hypnotized soul. It was getting dark and all the lamp posts and gas lamps at the station had been turned on. These were the final days of October and the whole atmosphere had been enveloped in the clouds of fog and mist in such a way that all the lights seemed dim, fade and flickering. It appeared as if someone had released a large number of fireflies in the thick white clouds.

In the same foggy and hazy atmosphere, we came out of the main building of the railway station and observed that the road was deserted and wrapped in fog. It seemed as if some widow clad in white Sari had just returned after mourning the death of her husband. We stood for a while looking around in search of some conveyance. Like a fish out of water, Abdullah seemed most restless and was repeatedly rubbing his hands to give the impression that time was swiftly slipping out of his hands. I wondered why he was in such a hurry. In the meantime, like an angel of mercy, Khairu was seen coming there, apparently after dropping some passenger at his destination. I immediately called him

and the very next moment, both of us were seated in his galloping tonga and were heading for Maulvi Alim's home situated in an old locality of the city. But on account of the severe fog and mist on the way, Khairu's horse was running at a very slow pace. As a precautionary measure, Khairu had turned on both the gas lamps hanging along the two front poles in the hope of increasing the visibility level but it too did not make any real difference. In this biting cold, the steam coming out of the horse's nostrils indicated that it was breathing after all. Passing through the circles of the dim pale lights of the distant lamp posts on the dark roads, we were making our way on the Litton Road which was bordered by tall trees on both sides. If some distant passerby had seen us travelling in Khairu's tonga in that particular atmosphere that evening, he would surely have recalled several such scenes found in the movies of Sherlock Holmes.

At last, the tonga entered the old locality through its gate. The whole area looked deserted and both of us immediately came down from the tonga. As Abdullah rushed towards his home, I suddenly realized that I had once again come to that street and that house which had become a forbidden tree for me. Maulvi Alim had prohibited me from coming there. I did not care for any restriction imposed by him but this restriction had been imposed by that charming lady who had become the sole honour of my life, my body, my soul and my whole existence. On realizing that I was not keeping pace with him, Abdullah turned and said "Why have you stopped? Please hurry yup."

"I can't go inside your home. I've been forbidden by Iman." The very next moment, I realized the mistake that I had made quite unintentionally in my hasty nervousness. By mentioning Iman's name to her would-be husband, I had revealed the secret of her meeting with me. In confusion, I attempted to change my words. "I mean the Maulvi has---. It's not appropriate for me to---."

As Abdullah carefully looked towards me, I noticed tears in his eyes. "Come on! Perhaps, he won't mind your coming now. Please come in. We're running out of time."

I still remained motionless. How could I break the promise that I had made with Iman?

"It was Iman who told me to go to the station and bring you here," informed Abdullah and added, "She's waiting for you." Leaving me standing stunned and mystified, Abdullah went forward to open the door and I was left with no option but to follow him. Iman's house was also covered with fog and the door of the courtyard was already open. That part of the city was experiencing the load shedding of electricity. With the force of the wind, Iman's cradle was swaying and it seemed as if Iman had just gone away after rocking in the cradle. A strange type of silence prevailed in the whole house. Suddenly, I was astonished to see Nighat coming out of the veranda. Candles placed in the small shelves of the veranda were twinkling. Tears hidden in Nighat's eyes were clearly visible in this dim light. Cutting through the thick fog, she rushed towards me and started sobbing, with her head pressed against my chest. While I was still perplexed by this incredible situation, Abdullah caught my hand and took me towards the women's [portion of the house. Why was he taking me towards that part of the house? If the Maulvi caught a glimpse of me walking freely in his house, he might do something terrible. But without letting me say anything, Abdullah dragged me to the room at the edge of the veranda. Clinging to my elbow, Nighat also entered the room with me. In the dim twilight of the room, the first face that I saw was that of Maulvi Alim himself. I was startled and became motionless. A strange helplessness was writ large on his face. This type of helplessness is visible only on the face of that person who single handedly fights a prolonged battle and finally, when he is sure of victory, the tables are suddenly turned on him and he meets a humiliating defeat. Haya was also sitting there. Besides her, there was another bright faced woman wrapped in a shawl sitting at the feet of a bed placed in one corner of the room. Why were all of them sitting silently? As my eyes became familiar with the murky twilight of the room, I observed that someone was lying on the bed and Haya and her mother were sitting on both sides of the bed to place cold strips on her forehead. Beside the bed, there lay a large silver pot full of cold water in which white strips could be seen. There was a sudden flash of lightning in my mind. I was roused from my sleep and became wide awake. I realized that the person lying on the bed was none other than Iman. Signs of severe weakness and intense fever were clearly evident from her face. But the pink halo of light around her

face could still be seen. She was breathing irregularly and with her eyes shut, she seemed to be in some deep trance. For a few moments, Maulvi Alim looked towards me and then he lowered his eyes. While I still stood at the door confounded and stupefied, Abdullah looked towards Nighat, indicated something to her with his hand and she entered the room holding my hand. I followed her like some enchanted or hypnotized soul. Abdullah sat near Iman's feet and spoke gently. "Iman, open your eyes. Look around, someone has come to see you."

But Iman's sleep or unconsciousness still continued. But then, Haya came forward, stroked her hair with her fingers and whispered something into her ears. There was some movement in Iman's body and she slowly opened her eyes, the same large murderous eyes. Then she saw me and for the next few moments, she continued watching me without winking her eyes. It appeared as if she wanted to absorb my image in her eyes. Quite surprisingly, her debilitating fever and weakness had not done any damage to her dazzling beauty. She still looked as captivating and charming as before. But it was quite evident from her irregular breathing that the deadly poison of love had completely pierced into her veins. That brutal poison had ruined and wrecked the whole existence of that innocent, vibrant and delicate girl. What an astonishing day it was, full of extraordinary events. In the presence of Maulvi Alim himself, I was present in the room of her sick daughter. All the members of his family including his would-be son-in-law were present around him in the same room but on that particular day, he seemed to have become speechless. There were tears in his eyes and his hands were trembling so violently that he could not even properly roll the rosary in his hands. Iman's lips quivered for a moment but nobody could understand anything. In a state of shock, the Maulvi went forward, kissed her forehead, recited something and blew on her. Tears were flowing out of his wife's eyes, but she was weeping so silently that no one could imagine her condition without having a closer look at her. My gaze was constantly fixed on Iman. It was on that day that I came to know of the miraculous powers of love. One such miracle happened when Maulvi Alim himself caught my hand and took me near Iman. Haya got up and enabled me to stand at that place. Iman looked towards me and for a moment, there appeared on her lips that faint but vibrant smile which was sufficient to sustain life in the whole universe. It was the same characteristic smile of hers which made dimples in her cheeks. As her eyes came into contact with mine, she conquered the whole universe in a moment and while doing so, she seemed to be saying "Love conquers all." Then, she shut her eyes again and for the next few minutes, I continued watching her, waiting for her to open her eyes again, but her sleep prolonged. Then, I heard Maulvi Alim's voice, as if coming from somewhere in space. He was reciting the Quranic verse which means "To Allah we belong and to Him is our return." This is the verse which is recited by the Muslims on hearing the news of someone's death. I could not understand why the Maulvi was reciting this verse at that time. Had someone died in the neighbourhood? I looked towards him rather disapprovingly and angrily. He should not have recited this verse while watching his princess like daughter sleeping peacefully on the bed. It might prove ominous. But then I saw Haya and Nighat clinging to each other and crying. What had happened to them? I asked myself. In order to get some help from Abdullah, I looked towards him. I wanted him to take away both the stupid girls so that their crying might not disturb Iman in her sound sleep. But I saw another strange spectacle. With his head buried in his knees, Abdullah too was weeping most passionately. Same was the case with Iman's mother. Instead of consoling her, Haya and Nighat were also weeping with her. Time and again, Haya and Nighat were kissing her luminous forehead and combing her hair with their own fingers. Why were they unable to understand the simple fact that it was not proper for them to disturb her peaceful sleep? The Maulvi was still loudly reciting some Quranic verses. As a last resort, I looked towards him, hoping that he might be able to convince the other members of his family to behave in a reasonable way. But to my utter astonishment, his own face and beard were wet with the flowing tears. I wiped away the tears from his face and by placing my finger on my lips, I beckoned all of them to keep quiet but it proved counter productive for Haya and Nighat. Haya was now crying hysterically and it was becoming extremely difficult for her mother to prevent her from total collapse. Nighat came to me, caught hold

of my shoulders and shook me violently. "Brother, Iman is gone. She has left us forever. She would never return to us now." The snow and fog frozen on my mind began to melt but I was still finding it difficult to come to grips with the situation. What was Nighat trying to say? Why were all of them still weeping and crying? Then, all of a sudden, the Quranic verses which the Maulvi had just recited began echoing in my ears and I sat down beside Iman's bed. With her eyes shut and breathing stopped, she was lying on the bed, wrapped in a sheet of cloth, with all her bewitching beauty and mesmerizing charm, like a princess, surrounded by a halo of light. She still had a faint smile on her lips but it was I alone who could perceive this smile, because her last smile was only meant for me. In this emotionally charged atmosphere, I called her in a low voice "Iman." But she still remained motionless. Alarmed at her condition, I looked towards the Maulvi who was standing behind me. "What has happened to her? Why isn't she speaking? Tell her to say something. She never disobeys you and has a great love and respect for you. She will surely speak if you ask her to do so."

Instead of answering, the Maulvi burst into tears, pulled me towards him and caught me in his arms. The moment I went into his arms, a flood of tears gushed forth from my eyes. The more he attempted to console me, the more bitterly I cried. Gradually, I began to understand why her breathing had stopped and why she was not responding to our entreaties. But still I was unable to find appropriate words which are used to describe the eternal silence of someone. At that catastrophic moment when Iman was breathing her last, the skies should have burst, the earth's rotation should have stopped and all of us, who were present around her at that time, should have perished. I wondered why nothing of this sort happened. Eversince my first encounter with her, I had become habitual of seeing things with her eyes, but why was light still present in my eyes when she had shut her eyes forever? Why was my power of speech not snatched away from me, in spite of the fact that I had become accustomed to using her words? My ears were always waiting to hear her, sweet, soft and melodious voice, but why did my sense of hearing still remain intact, when there was no more chance of hearing her voice again? My heart which was in the habit of beating along with her heart should have burst the moment her heart beat stopped. I was not willing to give even the shadow of hers to someone else, but how was it that in my own presence, someone took away her soul from her body? In other words, all of my claims proved false. I felt an irresistible urge to cry and scream at the top of my voice but look at my helpless condition. The thought of her sanctity and modesty was preventing me from openly lamenting her death. With the passing moments, as my tears began drying up, I understood the meaning of weeping without shedding tears. The Maulvi tried his best to console me but in a short while, I had to lose control over my consciousness. Before falling unconscious, I saw Iman's mother for the last time. She was still kissing her forehead and covering her face with a sheet of cloth. But then, I became totally oblivious of my surroundings and lost consciousness while I was still in the Maulvi's arms.

After the dramatic events of that day, it took me another fifteen days to regain consciousness. When I opened my eyes, I found myself lying on the bed in a room in Mr. Siddiqi's house, with syringes and drips pierced into the different organs of my body. I was later on told by Mr. Siddiqi that after keeping me in the railway hospital, he had shifted me to his own house, because, the railway hospital did not have all the required facilities. Moreover, he had hired the services of an eminent private doctor of the city and it was not possible for him and the rest of his team to pay daily visits to the railway hospital. For the first few days, I had completely lost my memory. In utter amazement, I only stared at the unfamiliar faces of all those who were frequently walking around me, giving me injections and examining my fever. According to Mr. Siddiqi, the doctors finally decided to shift me to the main hospital of the city, because, my physical condition was gradually improving but my memory was still lost and consequently, my body and mind were not working in harmony with each other. It was a matter of great concern for the doctors who shifted me to the city's main hospital. My physical condition was improving and my fever was becoming less frequent. At times, the nurses found it difficult to make me eat porridge and other such liquid foods. But on such occasions, Mr. Siddiqi came to their help and by means of love or force, made me eat something.

Perhaps even in this state of mental stupor, I found myself buried beneath the heap of favours that he had done to me during the past few months. After some time, the hospital attendants began taking me out on the wheel chair to the large lawn and grassy plots of the hospital, so that I could have a stroll in the fresh air.

But there was no improvement in the foggy condition of my mind. I only stared at the faces, attempted to recognize them but failed. Everything seemed to be happening in a dream. Maulvi, Alim, Abdullah, Shakir, Khairu, Ghafura and many other people might have been coming to see me in the hospital and I might have been looking at their faces as if all of them were strangers to me. Although, my body was positively responding to the medicines being given to me by the doctors, my mind was still showing no response to them. In view of my improved physical condition, the doctors permitted Mr. Siddiqi to shift me to his home but at the same time, they advised him to take full care of me. It was perhaps my last evening in the hospital, because I was going to be shifted to Mr. Siddiqi's home the next morning. All of a sudden, there was a stir in the corridors of the hospital. Sitting on my wheel chair beside the window, I was looking outside with vacant eyes. A few moments ago, I had seen two large Mercedes cars entering the hospital compound. In a short while, all the noise that had suddenly erupted in the corridors of the hospital ended up near the door of my room. As the door opened, a woman with a somewhat familiar face was seen entering the room. In a state of shock, she watched me for a few moments and then suddenly, it seemed as if something happened to her. With a loud cry, she ran towards me and held me in her arms most passionately. After her, a ripe aged honourable and dignified man elegantly dressed entered the room, followed by two boys. One of the boys, who looked one or two years younger than I, also started weeping like the woman and began touching my hair and face. I did not like their actions. After a while, the doctor entered the room and said something to the dignified man who came forward with heavy steps and told the woman to keep quiet. They stayed in my room till late at night and when I became sleepy, I was taken to bed by one of the helpers present with the nurse. But before I could sleep, a strange thing happened. The honourable man came to me and lovingly caressed my cheek. I suddenly recalled something. At times during my childhood, while I was going to sleep, someone used to caress my cheeks in the same manner. When I woke up the next morning, all preparations had been made to shift me to Mr. Siddiqi's home. All those people who had come to my room during the previous evening were also present on that occasion. The man and the woman were discussing something with the doctor who was perhaps, trying to make them understand something. Perhaps, they were insisting that they should be permitted to take me with them while the doctor was telling them that it would be better for me to stay with Mr. Siddiqi till my complete recovery. To be very honest, I myself did not want to go with them, because whenever I saw them, I felt a strange kind of burden on my mind. At last, on seeing the signs of dislike for them on my face, they also decided to act in accordance with the doctor's advice. However, they accompanied me in their cars to Mr. Siddiqi's home. Afterwards, they began coming there quite regularly and watching me while I was sitting on my wheel chair in the veranda or the garden and looking at some flower or wall.

Another strange thing happened a few days later. A man dressed as a driver arrived there with a young girl. Both of them seemed quite familiar and for some unknown reason, the girl burst into tears, as soon as she saw me. With a great deal of difficulty, the uniformed driver and Mr. Siddiqi made her silent. When the girl asked Mr. Siddiqi about my clothes and other things, he brought from somewhere a shirt and a uniform worn by the coolies. As the girl was looking into the pockets of the uniform and the shirt, two pearls fell down on the ground from some pocket. The moment they tossed on the floor, quite involuntarily, my hands advanced towards them to pick them up, as if they were a valuable possession of mine which I did not wish to lose at any cost. With the sound of the falling pearls, something crashed inside me. After falling on the floor, they again tossed in the air and there was another crash inside me. It seemed to me that a movie was being shown in slow motion. Before the pearls could come down on the ground for the third time, I could feel thunder like explosions taking place in my mind. My befogged mind and benumbed sensibilities were suddenly jolted and I remembered that the pearls had been given to me by Iman. Yes of course, these were the same pearls but how did they reach here? I realized that the girl standing before me was Nighat who had come there with her father Shakir and the other man standing with them was Mr. Siddiqi. Afterwards, I gradually recalled all the events that had taken place since that dark ominous night and recognized all the faces that I had seen during the past few days in the hospital and in Mr. Siddiqi's home. Shakir was accompanied by none other than the Commissioner, my mother and the rest of the members of my family. Iman had gone but what a shameful thing it was that I was still alive. My head was gripped by a severe pain. I was later on informed by the doctors that I had temporarily lost my mental equilibrium due to the sudden shock of that night. In medical terms, it is perhaps known as temporary amnesia. I had seen several such events in the movies on the cinema screen without knowing that I was also destined to pass through the same experience. The events that took place afterwards can be described in a few words. The Commissioner, and my mother repeatedly came to Mr. Siddiqi's home in the hope of taking me back with them. Mr. Siddiqi also had the same opinion but I frankly told all of them that I could shift to any other place but would not like to return home. On hearing my refusal, they no more insisted on my going with them. All the members of my family including the Commissioner, my mother, my brother Sajjad and his wife were extremely ashamed of their behaviour but now I had no concern with them. The girl for whom I had been living and for whose sake I had forsaken everyone and everything no longer remained in the world and now, it did not matter where and how I would spend the rest of my life. Ibad however daily came to meet me at the station. By now, all the employees at the station had become aware of my identity. But Khairu, Ghafura and other workers at the station were still my friends and always took care of me. However, even after regaining my consciousness, I could not get back my words. For hours and hours, I used to sit at the same place, staring in the sky, without saying anything to anyone. Till then, I had not been able to reconcile myself with the idea that Iman had died. I was fed up with the whole world and was full of hatred and disdain for religion which had grabbed away my Iman from me. The innocent girl had been fatally caught up and ruthlessly crushed in the war of love and religion. Her tender heart and simple mind could not stand up to the pressure of this brutal war and eventually, she lost the battle of her life.

On a couple of occasions, Abdullah also came to see me at the station. But on each occasion, we simply sat facing each other, without exchanging even a single word. His immense sorrow and grief at the loss of Iman was not so much different from that of mine. Instead of using words, we were capable of conveying our feelings and emotions in a better way through the language of silence. At times, words deprive our feelings and emotions of their real worth and value, scale down their honour, prestige and importance and are unable to describe their force and intensity. The fact is that on certain occasions, words disgrace our feelings and emotions and, therefore, instead of talking to each other, Abdullah and I preferred to remain silent in order to feel each other's pain and agony.

During my first meeting with Nighat after regaining consciousness, she described to me about Maulvi Alim's change of mind. I came to know from her that before her death, Iman had been suffering from the same deadly fever for the last two nights. It appeared that her soul was eager to leave her body but she seemed to be desperately waiting for someone before letting her soul fly to the heavens. Two days before her death, the doctors had expressed their hopelessness about her recovery but still, the Maulvi firmly believed that his prayers were more powerful and more effective than all the medicines. But this faith in the power of prayers began to crumble on the third day. Abdullah fell down on the Maulvi's feet and implored him to let Iman have a final glimpse of mine before dying, because all the other members of her family knew that this was exactly what she wanted. But at the same time, all of them were fully aware of the fact that due to her modesty and shyness, she would never say this thing to anyone, even if it required her to remain in the same miserable and agonizing condition for an indefinite period. Haya had also requested Abdullah to fetch me from the station. Instead of taking any personal initiative in this connection, Abdullah approached the Maulvi and lodged a humble appeal to allow him to fulfil this last desire of Iman. Initially, the Maulvi was infuriated and bitterly scolded him but with the passage of time, as Iman's condition rapidly deteriorated, the rigid religious father of his inside crumbled. Finally, on the third evening, when Abdullah literally wept before him, he had to surrender. For the first time in his life, he allowed a stranger to cross the threshold of his house and even permitted him to go to the women's portion. Perhaps, he was shattered from inside that very moment, when he realized that Iman's passion of love for me was as strong as was mine for her. It was something quite unimaginable for him. He was absolutely sure of Iman's faithfulness and obedience to him and could not simply imagine that someone else could ever secretly enter her heart. It was the worst shock for the strict and rigid religious man present inside him. But at the same time, he was a loving father as well and the fact that her beloved daughter sacrificed her life for the sake of his pleasure without letting him know about the real condition of her heart, was most agonizing for him. Perhaps, the man who finally permitted Abdullah to bring me from the station was not Maulvi Alimuddin but a kind and loving father. But it was too late when he took that step because by then, he had lost his daughter forever.

During her severe illness, Iman had given Nighat a closed envelope containing a letter for me and had requested her to give it to me after her marriage with Abdullah. While giving her last letter to Nighat Iman could not have imagined that her own days had been numbered in this world. Anyhow, Nighat handed over that envelope to me but for several days, I could not open it. Daily, I summoned up my courage and thought of opening it, but I always lost courage at the last moment and carefully put it back into the drawer. Daily, I brought out that closed envelope from the drawer like some very sacred writing, kissed it, touched my forehead and eyes with it and then put it back in the same drawer. Perhaps by doing so, I endeavoured to strengthen my notion that Iman was still with me with her unread letter. I wanted to find an excuse for passing the rest of my life imagining that I could hear her unsaid words. But this situation could not last long. One day, Mr. Siddiqi who was in his office, telephoned his servant Rahim to bring some particular paper from home. At that time, Rahim was cooking meal. He could not properly understand which paper was required by Mr. Siddiqi. In a hurry, he took out Iman's closed letter from the drawer and gave it to Mr. Siddiqi in his office. As soon as he opened the envelope and began reading the paper inside it, he realized his mistake. Sitting in a desolate corner of the platform at that time, I was watching two labourers unloading goods from the goods train. As I looked around, I saw Mr. Siddiqi coming towards me. I immediately stood up and greeted him. "I'm sorry gentleman. I had asked Rahim to bring a paper from home but he mistakenly brought this envelope which seems to have your personal letter. Although I've opened it, yet, rest assured that I haven't read even a single line of it."

After giving me Iman's letter in the open envelope, Mr. Siddiqi went away. The moment I held it in my trembling hands, my condition changed dramatically. My legs became lifeless and I seemed to be suffering from some paralyzing disease for several years. In utter bewilderment, I sat down on the

bench with my violently beating heart. I had a feeling that Iman herself was sitting beside me. For several days, this letter had been lying in my table's drawer but I had not been able to read it. Now that Mr. Siddiqi had mistakenly opened it and given it to me, I had a burning desire to read it. The disturbed condition of my heart at that moment was not different from that which I had while I was attempting to talk to Iman during the couple of meetings that I had with her. Finally, I took out the letter from the envelope with my trembling fingers. Tears began flowing out of my eyes quite spontaneously as soon as I glanced at her captivating style of writing.

"I know that you wouldn't have returned home till now. You seem to have forgotten what I told you about love. I told you that there is no obstinacy in love. Love is the name of surrendering, even after victory. Only true lovers know how to surrender after winning. Hammad, you have also won and, therefore, please surrender for my sake. Moreover, love does not necessarily mean achieving your objective as I told you that the whole life can easily be spent relishing the memories of a single meeting. It doesn't matter if I haven't been able to become yours in this life. I will always be praying for your eternal company in the next world. I'm fully aware of the fact that in order to return to your home, you'll have to swallow many bitter pills and fight against strong opposition from your own inside. But I know that you're fully capable of doing all these things.

Take care of yourself and always be happy."

For a long long time, I sat at the same place, reading her letter again and again and shedding tears choking with emotions. I was suddenly startled when someone placed his hand on my shoulder. It was Abdullah who must have been standing there for a long time, watching my condition. He wiped away the tears from my cheeks and then looked into my eyes. "For how long will you continue to make us weep? Just have a look at those who've come to see you today."

As I followed Abdullah's gaze, I stood up in confusion. The platform seemed to be crowded with the members of Shakir's family and those of my own. I could see Mother, my elder Brother Sajjad, his wife Abrina, their son sunny, my younger brother Ibad, Nighat and Shakir. But most astonishing for me was the sight of the Commissioner standing hand in hand with Maulvi Alimuddin. They were standing ahead of everyone. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the Maulvi with tearful eyes holding the Commissioner's hand. How was it that the most powerful and most arrogant retired commissioner of the city was standing shoulder to shoulder with a poor Maulvi? The amazing thing was that his eyes were full of regret and remorse instead of pride and arrogance and his back that had always been erect was now bent. All the others stood there, only the Maulvi came towards me and I automatically lowered my eyes when he placed his hands on my shoulders. "Hammad, you have won and your love too has won. You have proved that true love can defeat the whole world. All of us have been shattered from inside. We are all ashamed of our behaviour. The Commissioner himself came to my home. He, his wife and all the others have made amends for their misbehaviour. Forgiveness is a great virtue. I humbly request you to forgive me and the members of your family. We all consider ourselves to be very low and humble as compared to your lofty and sublime love. Those who are low and humble, are not punished, they are forgiven. You should also forgive us all. I am even ready to fold my hands before you."

But before he could fold his hands, I immediately caught them in my own hands. As he embraced me, our eyes flooded with tears. While trying to console me, he could not control his own tears. Holding my hand, he took me to the Commissioner standing a few steps away. As I stood there with my bent head, he caressed my cheeks as he used to do in my childhood. All of a sudden, the Retired Commissioner Amjad Raza disappeared from my sight and instead, I could see my dear father whom I had known in my childhood. As he extended his arms, I buried my head into his chest and burst into tears. Holding me in his arms, he too went on weeping for a long time. After several years, a father and his son were locked in a warm and loving embrace. Seeing us in this condition, Mother, Sajjad, Ibad, Abrina, Shakir and Nighat surrounded me. All of them were touching me and expressing their love for me. They were all shedding tears, as tears are one of the most effective means of expressing our feelings and emotions. We shed our tears only for those who are very near

and dear to us and it was for the first time that I had seen tears in my father's eyes. Standing at some distance with Khairu and other workers, Ghafura was also wiping away the tears from his eyes with a large handkerchief. There was a strange delight on their faces but at the same time, they all seemed somewhat sad inwardly. Perhaps, they had realized that I would no longer stay with them. I knew very well that physically, I might be away from them but spiritually, I would always be among them because there are certain relations which are unbreakable. Ghafura, Khairu and others were somewhat afraid of the Commissioner and, therefore, could not come closer to me. When my father saw them waving hands towards me from a distance, he himself took me to them and I introduced all of them to him one by one, exactly as I used to introduce my friends to him during my childhood. He shook hands with all of them and thanked them for taking care of me. In the meantime, Mr. Siddiqi also arrived there and Father hugged him for a long time. Perhaps, Shakir had told him everything about Mr. Siddiqi and his kind treatment with me. All of them gave me a hearty send off as if I had been a bridegroom embarking upon my matrimonial journey.

Apparently, Iman had gone away from me, never to come back again, but in reality, she was always with me, talking to me, encouraging me, loving me, wiping away my tears and touching her eyes with my hands. At last, I was back home again, but there was nothing which could attract my attention or interest. I myself asked Father to arrange my admission in London's Kingston University and filled in the application forms. One month later, I received call letter from the University and on a cold November evening, I left Iman's city carrying with me an inexhaustible treasure of her memories.

CHAPTER 29

THE TREASURE OF MEMORIES

After Iman's tragic demise, I went to London, hoping against hope that by leaving her city, I might be able to get some relief from my intense pain and agony, but nothing of this sort could ever happen. Her memory was like a sharp dagger which always remained firmly pierced into my heart. Whenever I was in a gathering, my attention was diverted for a while, but the moment I was alone, I was surrounded by her two large eyes. Her two pearls and her last letter became my companions and for several hours, we would talk to each other. Quite astonishingly, whenever I remembered her, my solitude appeared to be a gathering for me, and while I was in a gathering, I often felt lonely. The moment I was in a crowd of people, I would feel lonely and wait for hours for the dispersing of the crowd, so that in my solitude, I might again be able to enjoy the company of Iman's memories.

Among my friends, Kamran alone knew the real condition of my heart. When for the first time, I told him about Iman's death, he was stunned and remained in a state of shock for a long time. Till then, he believed that Iman must have been married to someone else, because during the last two years, he had not visited Pakistan and I too had not been in contact with him since my coming to the railway station. On hearing my woeful tale, he was so much upset that I had to give him sleeping pills that night. For several days, he remained annoyed with me for not informing him of the traumas through which I had been passing. Moreover, he was surprised at the exceptional strength of my nerves which had kept me alive despite all the tragic happenings. I did not have the courage to tell him that the continuation of my life was the source of greatest embarrassment for me. I wished I should have lost all my senses and perished that very moment when Iman breathed her last. The continuation of my life was a punishment which she had awarded to me while departing from this world and I was still alive undergoing the same punishment. Rebecca too always complained to me that I often remained lost somewhere else even in a gathering. But that day, she was annoyed with me for some other reason. I told her in the morning that during the previous night, I had my dinner with Sarah at her home. At that time, Rebecca was trying to make a snowman with the snow that had gathered along the canal after the overnight snowfall. In this attempt, her white hands had turned red and were now becoming blue. The moment I told her about the dinner at Sarah's home, she left the snow and rushed towards me. "What! Did you go to Sarah's home last night for dinner without even telling me?"

"The fact is that she made this offer at about 3-30 in the afternoon yesterday and by that time, you were gone. Afterwards, I spent the whole evening in the library and that's why I'm telling it to you now."

Rebecca became somewhat depressed. "I don't know what happens to me when I see you with Sarah. But the fault is mine because a single gust of cool refreshing breeze cannot suffice everyone and nor can a single shower of rain bring fertility to every patch of land. Anyhow, I've no complaints to make and I'm contented with my lot and pleased with whatever share of it I've got."

Before Rebecca could say something else, Sarah was seen coming towards us. In view of the cold snowy weather, she was wearing black jeans, dark red high necked sweater and special shoes to protect her feet from snow. On her shoulders, she had the same jacket which I had given to her during the previous night to save herself from the severe cold. Rebecca could easily recognize my jacket and on seeing Sarah with my jacket, she again became busy with her snowman. Sarah gave me my jacket and remarked, "Here's your jacket and thanks a lot for taking care of me last night."

"Sir Isaac must have thoroughly searched all the pockets of my jacket in solitude after my departure."

Sarah gave a loud laugh. "Now, He isn't as bad as that. In fact he himself apologized to me after you left."

"Oh that's wonderful."

Rebecca dried her hands that had become wet with snow and spoke, "Well, I ['m going inside the campus, otherwise, I may lose my hands in the snow."

Sarah tried to stop her but she did not turn around to see. I had a feeling that if she had turned around and seen us, Sarah would surely have seen her eyes wet with tears.

“Oh, what’s happened to her?” Asked Sarah. “Why have you made my dearest friend so gloomy and sad? She has never been like that.”

“Perhaps, I’m always surrounded by sadness and whoever lives with me, eventually falls into this deep ominous pit of sadness.”

Sarah looked attentively towards me. “You’re a brilliant talker and Rebecca too seems to have been greatly impressed by your talks. There surely is something in you. But what exactly is it?”

I laughed at the way in which Sarah uttered these words. “Is it a question or a judgment?”

“No, I’m saying the right thing. I’ve never seen my papa so much upset as he was last night. He has been my ideal because he’s a man of exceptionally strong nerves and has always confronted the greatest challenges of his life with a broad smile on his face. But for some unknown reason, ever since you’ve come to this university, I’ve always found him worried because of you. Last night, I had an argument with him and asked him if he considered me and my deeply rooted beliefs to be so weak that I would renounce them so easily. Since childhood, we’ve been repeatedly told that we are great and would always remain great. I asked him if our greatness would be reduced by the denial of a single boy and if our beliefs would be undermined by someone else’s beliefs which are different from ours. But he had no answer to any of my questions.”

I silently listened to the words of that confident girl. “What did he say to you in response to your questions?”

“I have to say with regret that for the first time in my life, instead of trying to convince me with logic and arguments, he behaved like a traditional father, who tries to impose his own experiences and apprehensions on his children and attempts to frighten them with his own inner fears. The other day you said that darkness is always afraid of light. If it is darkness, I’m also a part of it. But if it is the case, why am I not afraid of you or your beliefs?”

It was quite evident from her words that her father’s irrational attitude had plunged her into a state of mental confusion and perplexity. At that moment, I also realized a major difference in the attitudes of the people living in the East and the West. In the West, a girl can cross examine her father and have a heated debate with him about the correctness and incorrectness, rationality and irrationality of his views and behaviour. But in the East, it is extremely difficult for a young girl to disagree with or oppose her father’s views. While contemplating on this fact, I remembered Iman most intensely. Sarah continued to speak while I was engrossed in my own thoughts. Suddenly she looked towards me “Why’s it that you are often suddenly lost somewhere in a moment?”

Thus, Sarah too asked the same question which Rebecca had already asked me several times.

“Nowhere, I was only listening to you.”

“No, that’s not the case. While listening to me, you were somewhere else. The fact is that you are never with us. I’ve never seen so many whirlpools of darkness in someone’s eyes. If it isn’t something very personal, you can trust me.”

How could I tell that innocent girl that a huge number of sorrows and griefs had become my eternal companions? I didn’t want to make her sad by telling all these things. “The tale is so long that you would be bored by it. However, believe you me that there isn’t any such personal thing in it as can be hidden from you. I’ll surely share it with you in some moments of solitude.”

These words of mine made her happy and she extended her hand towards me. “Do you promise?”

I held her hand and said, “Yes, I make a solemn promise.”

The same two dimples appeared on her cheek and added to their beauty. The class bell rang for the third time and both of us went towards the classroom.

CHAPTER 30

FEAR

Then, another strange thing happened. The University administration announced that contrary to the earlier traditions, the students would not be allowed this time to read out their research papers openly in front of all the students in the hall. Instead, all the students would initially submit their term papers in the library and after their thorough analysis and scrutiny, the administration would allow only a few selected students to read out their papers in the presence of other students at a special ceremony. Sarah was much exasperated at this decision but I knew very well that the administration did not want to allow me to convey my research to others. The Jewish members of the administration were strongly desirous that the young generation should not have any other views about the concept of the holocaust except those which had been emphatically preached and advocated by the Jews for decades. For the first time in that whole affair I felt a satisfying relief to think that those who regarded themselves as great were actually afraid of me and my faith. It simply meant that in reality, we alone have the right to call ourselves great, but we have ruined our greatness with our own hands. The Jews are apprehensive that we might regain our lost glory somehow or the other. After several days, sir Isaac looked calm and relieved in the classroom. It seemed as if he had been able to remove a great burden from his mind. As soon as the period started, Rebecca who was already infuriated at the above mentioned decision of the University, outrightly asked sir Isaac as to why the administration had changed its existing rules and regulations about the term papers. But in a tactful manner, he disposed off the matter by telling her that it was an internal matter of the administration. Explaining the matter he argued that for a number of years, the University had been receiving sub-standard research papers along with the high quality papers and, therefore, the administration had decided to make public only those papers which could come up to the high standards of the University. On receiving this reply, Rebecca threw towards me a piece of paper on which she had written whether she should ask sir Isaac if the administration had taken that decision in view of my selection of the topic for my term paper. She only changed her mind when I angrily glared towards her, otherwise, she would surely have asked that question from sir Isaac. As a strange coincidence, Sarah was also writing her thesis on the subject of Holocaust. Her research was based on a book (Diaries) written in support of the holocaust by a Jewish writer Fredich Kelez. Moreover, she had attempted to prove that the concept of holocaust was a reality in the light of several other books and interviews. Sarah never tried to conceal her research from me. Instead, in a challenging manner, she used to smile while informing me about her daily progress in her research. All those moments in which Sarah and I were together and discussing something, proved very hard upon Rebecca.

It was a bright sunny day and all the students were in the mood of having a sun bath. I caught Rebecca's hand and took her to my favourite bench along the canal and told her to sit with me for a while. I had decided to talk to her frankly and she was amazed at my attitude.

"I want to say something to you today."

"Oh Medi, do you intend to propose to me?" she asked in utter astonishment, looking at her hand firmly gripped in my hand.

"I wish I could be as fortunate as that. He who wins your hand would be the most fortunate man on earth."

Rebecca's eyes suddenly brightened. "Do you really think so? There isn't any such thing in me."

In your fascinating personality, you've got all those charming features which can make you the dream girl for any young man in the world. For hours and hours, people sit still and enchanted on the path from which you pass. With my own eyes, I've seen several people sighing desperately and restlessly awaiting an opportunity to see a single glimpse of yours. Even then you say that there's nothing special in your personality?"

For the first time I observed the redness of modesty on the face of that bold and pretty Western girl. A woman may belong to any part of the world but she always has this attribute somewhere in her personality.

She laughed and said, “Yes, there must be something special in me which makes all these boys sigh for me. But alas, this special feature of my personality is of no use for me because; it didn’t assist me in melting the stony heart of someone whom I love.”

It was quite evident from her words that she had decided to express her feelings quite openly. In front of us, the snow-like water of the canal emanating from River Thames was flowing silently and small crystals of frozen snow could also be seen in it. A pair of birds sitting on a marble slab of snow and busy taking out the bits of grass from the snow flew past us. In the clear sunshine, the golden colour of Rebecca’s face looked all the more charming and attractive. Clad in black skirt and black top, she resembled a golden doll wrapped in black velvet. After giving vent to her feelings, Rebecca became silent and began throwing small pebbles into the canal water. As she lifted her hand to fling the pebbles in the water, I caught her wrist. “Is it necessary to associate all the pleasures, desires and emotions with only one person? That unfortunate fellow may not deserve all these things. He may already have squandered all the colours and joys of his life somewhere else. He may have explored the rainbow of his life in the eyes of someone else.

In astonishment, Rebecca looked towards me with tearful eyes. “If it is the case, it means that all the colours of my life have faded away and my love would also remain colourless and unrequited.”

I could never imagine that she could also say such deep and philosophical things. Perhaps, love alone can teach us all such difficult things. As had been the case with me, Rebecca too seemed obstinate in her love. Love was once again playing its centuries old game with the only difference that the names of the lover and the beloved had changed. But its pains, sufferings and agonies were the same. If God did not give us the power to save ourselves from the devastating impacts of love, at least, He should have given us the power to prevent others from falling into the fiery pit of love. But perhaps, Nature itself enjoys watching this scene and after igniting the fire of love in the heart of one of two persons, it likes to see him or her passing the rest of his or her life undergoing intense pain, anguish and agony. Since times immemorial, Nature has been the most enthusiastic sponsor and spectator of this brutal and deadly game of love which would continue to bring unspeakable misery and indescribable suffering for the lovers, as was the case with Rebecca at that time. Alas, that innocent girl was unaware of the bitter fact that my soul had already flown away with that of Iman a long time ago. The poison of love which was now being slowly injected into her veins had already taken away my life.

With her bent head, Rebecca was sitting and trying to control her tears. One of her hands was still firmly gripped in my hand. With my other hand, I raised her chin and looked into her deep eyes.

“No my dear, I won’t allow you to weep any more. Poor helpless creatures like us have already cried and wept a lot due to love. It has made much fun of our tender and innocent feelings. We have received too many gashing wounds due to the blind arrows shot by cupid. But enough is enough. We won’t allow love to bring more death, destruction and misery for mankind.”

I was wiping away the tears from her face but new tears were appearing in her eyes at a much faster speed. Again and again, she was apologizing to me and promising not to weep but it appeared as if she would be swept away in the flood of her own tears. Then she stood up and ran away from there and I kept watching her running away. In the meantime, a pair of swans saw their reflection in the water, flapped their wings and came down on the surface of the water. Then they began talking to each other. “Why was that female swan weeping? Where’s her swan?” Asked the female swan from her mate.

The male swan took a long flight and again came down after hovering over her head “The world of human beings is strange indeed. I couldn’t see her swan even in the distance. A swan is sitting on the canal bank but his female partner is also not seen anywhere. Human couples who wander about the earth really look odd and ridiculous, because, they are ill matched. In contrast, we the swans are much better and much luckier. All of us have got our mates and we always fly together in the immense stretches of the air.”

The female swan cast a sad look on me and the running Rebecca and then blissfully flew away with her mate in the vast expanses of the sky.

CHAPTER 31

ABSTAINING FROM LOVE

After that day, Rebecca did not come face to face with me for several days. For the first few days, she remained absent from the University. I tried to contact her on her mobile phone as well as on her land line number, but she seemed to have switched off all her numbers. Later, when she resumed coming to the University, she looked much depressed and dejected and avoided looking towards me. One day, during a discussion in the Humaneering class, I got a chance of addressing her. The topic of the discussion was “The sense of loss and achievement.” When sir Isaac invited me to express my views, I cast a furtive glance on Rebecca, who was also looking towards me. She at once lowered her eyes as I started speaking. In fact, while speaking I was actually addressing her. “If a person really has the genuine feelings of love, he always achieves something and never loses anything. Love may be a one-sided affair, but it always gives you a beautiful sensation even if the passion on the other side is of a much lesser strength and intensity. Love is not a business transaction in which both parts of a scale should have an equal weight. Less weight in one part increases it in the other, in case of real love. True lovers never love in the hope of some reward. However, if their love is responded with the same force and intensity, their reward is doubled. But even if their love is not reciprocated at the same level, they do get the due share of the reward of their love and this much reward is also sufficient for passing the rest of their life. It should however be remembered that love is the name of a journey which is made by the barefooted lovers on the burning sand of a trackless desert where the sun shines perpetually with all its scorching heat. But those lovers who sit down for a while in this arduous journey to count the blisters of their feet, lose sight of their destination, forever.”

After expressing my views, I sat down and noticed that all the students were silent for a while and Rebecca was most eager to shed tears but thanks to the bell which rang to indicate that the period was over, otherwise, all the students would have come to know of her secret that day. One after the other, all of us left the class, but I was so much pre-occupied with my own thoughts that I could not hear Joseph who was calling me. I was startled when he called me rather loudly for the third time while coming after me. “Hi Mr. Hammad, in which deep thoughts are you lost?”

He caught me by my hand and took me out of the university’s main building. It was obvious from his manners that he wanted to tell me something very important in solitude. As we reached the open atmosphere he asked me a direct question. “Do you want the completion of your term paper on Holocaust or the cancellation of your admission at this university?”

“My answer is very well known to you. I’m not one of those who retreat after taking some initiative.”

“I knew it quite well, but now, you should mentally prepare yourself for leaving the University forever, because its administration has at last decided to get rid of you permanently. They might not have invited me to attend the governing body’s meeting which was held yesterday but they still believe that my loyalties to them are beyond any doubt. Moreover, at some later point in this whole affair along with the signatures of the rest of the teachers, my signatures would also be required by them to give the impression that it was a unanimous decision. .”

“They’ve already made it sure that I shouldn’t be allowed to share my research with other students. What’s their new allegation against me? Why did they convene this meeting?”

“Did you go to the library of Park Square Avenue a couple of days ago?”

“Yes, I did.”

I remembered that I had visited that library on the same day when I was invited by Sarah to her home for dinner.

“Did you have a row with the librarian named Peter Thomas that day?”

“You can’t call it a row. He was somewhat reluctant to give me some books which should have been present in the library as listed in its catalogue. But this incident took place outside the university premises and the administration should have no concern with it.”

“Perhaps it is not in your knowledge that Peter Thomas himself is a Russian born Jew. He has written an application to the University administration with reference to the events that took place on that day when you demanded certain books from him. According to him, when he could not provide you the required books, you threatened him and subjected him to religious harassment. For this reason, he has requested the University administration to take strong action against you.”

I was infuriated. “It is an absurd nonsense. I neither threatened him nor tried to harass him in any way. It’s only a cock and bull story.”

“I know that you are telling the truth but you also know that the University administration was in search of some excuse for taking action against you and now, you yourself have provided that much needed excuse to them.”

Signs of worry were quite visible on Joseph’s face.

I clearly remembered that day when I visited that library only a few days ago. I needed two long articles written by a French writer Robert Forison in December 1978 and January 1979. In these articles, he proved with the help of firm evidence that no incident involving the killing of Jews by burning them in the gas chambers ever took place. When I requested the librarian to give these articles to me, he denied their presence in the library. I showed him the library’s catalogue in which both the articles had been listed. Moreover, the library’s register revealed the fact that they had not been issued to anyone during the last several years. At this, Peter Thomas became upset and told me to come after one or two days, as he was terribly busy that day. Now, when Joseph informed me about his religion and nationality, I understood the motives behind his strange behaviour that day. When he refused to provide me the required material, I said to him in a somewhat strict tone that he was compelling me to approach the library’s administration or the library section of London’s Mayor Office and lodge a complaint against his laziness. At this, Peter was further annoyed with me and in a most reluctant mood, issued only one of the two articles to me and said that two articles could not be issued to me at one and the same time. He assured me to give me the other article after I had read the first one. I got that one article from him and returned. It was the whole story of that day. I neither threatened him nor talked to him in a loud voice. I was surprised to think how he was able to come to know that I was a student at London’s Kingston University. After some thinking I understood the whole matter. While issuing the one article, he must have noted the identity card number issued to me by the University. It was evident that the Jews were tightening their cordon around me.

After discussing the matter with Joseph, I remained busy till the evening giving final touches to my term paper. I had realized that time was running out for me and, therefore, I must finish my term paper and submit it as soon as possible. At last, at six in the evening, while I was still busy in my work, quite unaware of the passage of the time, the university librarian told me that it was time for the library to be closed for that day. In astonishment as I lifted my head, I noticed that it was really dark outside. The moment I came out, I was welcomed by a gust of cold wind. The sky was getting red and there were signs of imminent snowfall. As I came out of the gate, there was no sign of any conveyance as far as I could see and I, therefore, decided to walk to the next block in search of the metro. The lights of London were now glittering with all their brilliance and the lofty neon signs looked like twinkling stars on the earth. Suddenly, the cell phone in the pocket of my overcoat began ringing. It was Sarah speaking from the other side in her soft voice. “Hi Mr. Hammad, I hope you’re still busy collecting material against the Jews. What are you doing right now?”

Smile appeared on my lips as I replied. “In this murderous weather, with my youthful heart, I’m trying to cover this long distance by walking on foot.”

Sarah also laughed on hearing my reply. “I’ve got two tickets for a theatrical play being staged at the Albert Hall tonight. Mama isn’t feeling well while as usual, Papa is worried because of you. Would you like to accompany me to the Albert Hall tonight?”

“If a beautiful young girl wants to go out with a boy on such an occasion, it’s quite appropriate for her prudent parents to make such excuses for not accompanying her.”

Sarah’s laughter was again heard on the cell phone. “Where are you at the moment?” she asked.

I told her the address of the road on which I was present at that time and within a few minutes, she arrived there in her white Battle Car. She was wearing maroon coloured high necked sweater and black skirt and her hair was untied. For the first time that evening, I saw her most extravagantly decorated; otherwise, in general, she preferred to remain simple, without any make up or other artificialities. She brought her car near me and stopped. "It's not the right thing for a young foreign boy to stroll alone on the London roads on such cold snowy evening. Get into my car immediately and I'll drop you at your destination."

With a smile I got into her car and she started driving it. Within a short while, we crossed the outskirts and reached the city of London with all its colourful lights and activities. Shops shining like glass on both sides were attracting everyone. All the major casinos of London were open and half naked girls standing outside them were inviting the passersby to come in and have some fun. These were large multi-storey casinos having long drive ways enabling the people to go inside while sitting in their cars. The large advertisement boards of newly released movies were also blinking. The largest of these was that of a new movie named King Kong. It was in fact a huge sized multi storied King Kong itself which was blinking with electric lights. While watching King Kong's Board, I remembered my nephew Sunny who was very fond of this movie but till then, it had not been released in the cinemas of his city. Now, we were passing over the grand bridge, the gigantic yellow lights around which had created a day like atmosphere. The Signal was down. Perhaps, a steamer was passing underneath the bridge. The automatic bridge was split from the centre and was lifted upwards. The ship which was blowing its horn passed through the centre of the bridge. Seeing their fellow Londoners, the people standing on the deck happily chanted slogans. By waving their hands excitingly, they seemed to be promising with their beloved city of London that although they were leaving it for some time, yet, they would soon return to it. They were requesting it to retain all its colourful activities and festivities till their return. The fact is that everyone regards his native city as the greatest of all the cities, just as the city of Quetta was dearer to me than all other cities of the world. The air of Quetta was still filled with the sweet fragrance of my Iman and my favourite smell of the burning of raw coal could still be felt in the cold December evenings of that city. Our cities become dear to us like our own blood relationships.

Sarah was driving the car at a very high speed and shortly after the rejoining of the bridge, we found ourselves in the parking lounge of Albert Hall which was jam-packed with the audience, due to some special play which was being staged that night. Our seats were in the second row and soon after we took our seats, the lights of the hall were switched off. The rising of the curtain on the stage indicated the start of the play which was based on a love story. Love has always been giving birth to countless dramatic and romantic stories. It was also a similar story. The hero on the stage had to bid farewell to the heroine, leave his native city and go to some distant town where he had got a job. While parting from his beloved, he did not have the least idea that he would be ambushed in the thick forest through which he had to pass on his way to the distant city of London where the heroine's stepmother was sending him by ship to work as a labourer. The heroine too was unaware that her greedy step mother had decided to sell her to the pirates who were on board the ship which was supposed to take her across the sea. The boy and the girl were shown on the stage with tearful eyes. They were passionately bidding farewell to each other, consoling each other and promising to meet again after one year, without having the least notion that it would turn out to be the last meeting of their life. In order to make the scene lively the actors were acting in a very natural and realistic manner. Their dialogues were also highly effective and impressive. All the spectators were spellbound and were silently watching the proceedings of the play. In the next scene, the hero was shown passing through the thick forest. In order to intensify the impact of the scene, the lines of Robert Frost's famous poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" were being recited in the background.

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep;

And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep.”

Perhaps, I was in class seven when I read this poem for the first time but while sitting in the Royal Albert Hall that night, I was watching the scenes depicted in the poem being transformed into reality before my own eyes. Passing through the jungle, the hero is ambushed by the robbers while the heroine is attacked by the pirates on the ship during her voyage. The hero is stabbed with a dagger while in the hope of saving herself from the pirates, the heroine jumps into the sea. Before his death, the boy requests the robbers not to tell his beloved about his death, otherwise, she too would die. In the same way, before drowning, the girl implores the pirates not to tell her lover about her death, otherwise, he would commit suicide. In this way, both the lovers perish. Tears could be seen in the eyes of almost all the spectators who were sitting in the hall and some women were even heard sobbing in the silence. For a long time after the falling of the curtain, people sat there stunned and shocked at what had happened to the two young lovers. Then, all of a sudden, the hall began echoing with the thunderous applause from all the audience. I noticed that Sarah’s eyes were also full of tears.

As Sarah and I came out of the hall, we observed that the city of London was under the cover of a velvet sheet of white snow. Her foxy car (Battle car) standing in the parking also seemed to be a large piece of snow. It looked as if instead of making a snowman, some naughty children had made a snow car. By the time we crossed the nearby streets of Albert Hall and reached the main road, the city of London had gone to sleep for the night. It appeared as if someone had cast a spell on the whole city by means of a white powder. As our car was sliding on the snow covered roads of London, the clock tower in a distant square announced that it was the midnight hour. Sarah, who was still lost in the play that we had just watched at the Albert Hall, was silently looking out of the wind screen while driving her car. I was also somewhat lost in my own thoughts when Sarah began to speak in a low tone. “The tragic end of such romantic stories always makes me sad and after watching such plays and movies, I remain depressed and dejected for several hours.”

“Love always ends at a tragic note like this.”

Startled by my reply, she looked towards me. “How do you know so much and so deeply about love? The other day, when you described the various stages of love in terms of different parts of the day, I discussed your views about love with Mama for several days. Similarly, your analysis of one-sided love affairs was also very thought provoking. How can a person talk about love in such a detailed manner, without personally passing through the torturous experience of love for thousands of times?”

“Sometimes, even a single experience of love proves more valuable than thousands of such experiences. The pains and pleasures given by this single experience of love are more than what you can expect from thousands of such experiences.”

Sarah looked attentively towards me. “It means you’ve also loved somebody in your life.”

“At times, the word love seems quite insufficient to me. Don’t you feel sometimes that the words we use to convey our feelings and emotions are extremely limited in their scope and utility? All the words included in our vocabulary only convey our apparent and superficial feelings. For our amorous feelings we use such words as love, fanaticism and infatuation. What about those feelings and emotions which go beyond all such limited terms? Why can’t our dictionaries provide us with some better words for expressing our real feelings with all their intensity, sincerity and truth?”

Sarah was listening to me with full attention. The expressions on her face indicated that she was trying to suppress or hide some feelings which she had at that time. “Can I take the liberty of asking you about that girl who is so fortunate that you don’t find appropriate words for expressing your feelings for her? Where’s she now?”

“She’s no longer in this world.”

Sarah could hardly control the steering of her car which skidded dangerously on the snow covered road. She was completely unnerved and I immediately pulled the hand brakes attached to the seat.

The car rolled on for a while with its own power and then stopped at some distance along a footpath. Sarah placed her head on the steering. I gently shook her. "Are you all right Sarah? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have told you all this."

"No, the fault is mine. I was so much absorbed in your talks that I lost my control over the car."

"If you wish, I can drive the car for the rest of the way."

Instead of saying anything, she left the steering seat and came towards me. I opened the door and went towards her seat and started driving the car. Sarah was still sitting silently looking outside the wind screen. While she was still lost in her thoughts, she began to speak in a low tone. "How is it possible for you to smile despite having such a huge sorrow in your heart and without ever letting someone share your pains and griefs? You are undoubtedly a unique fellow, quite different from all the other people. You don't belong to this world."

Without saying anything, I went on driving the car. While we were on the third road near Piccadilly at a short distance from the Westminster Bridge, Sarah told me to turn towards a wide but rather unknown road. Without asking anything, I turned the car towards that long desolate road. At some distance, there was a large cross roads in the centre of the road. It was so large that in order to go around it, I had to turn around the whole steering. From that point, the road was divided into four sections. In the centre of that cross roads, there was a fountain but the sprays of water coming out of it had frozen due to severe cold. At the end of the road, there was a magnificent old Jewish synagogue made of white stone. Covered with snow that white building resembled some palace in the fairyland. I parked the car in front of the synagogue whose wooden door had a very large image of Moses. Big lamps were emitting light on both sides of the door. As both of us got down from the car, Sarah looked towards me and spoke. "It's my favourite synagogue. I come here only on special occasions. There's a special reason that has brought me here at this midnight hour today. I've come here tonight to pray for the sake of your love and for your beloved who may not be alive in the physical sense but is still very much with you in your words, feelings, emotions and memories."

I was amazed at her words. She stepped forward and then turned to say something to me. "You may wait here for me for a while. I'll be back soon."

Perhaps she had thought that I was not willing to accompany her to the Jewish synagogue. But as she turned and went forward, I followed her footsteps and entered the synagogue in which dim lights could be seen on the shelves projecting from the high walls. There was a light fragrance in the whole building. Over the dais that had been made for the standing of the Rabbi, there was a wooden platform on which several candles had been placed and lit. Walking on the wooden floor, Sarah reached a particular spot where she stood and started reciting some verses from the Torah. I silently sat at the end of one of the long wooden benches which had been placed on both sides. There was such a strange silence in the synagogue that one could even hear the hissing sound produced by the burning of the candles. In the pin drop silence of the night, with her tearful eyes and her hands placed on her chest, in an inspirational mood, Sarah was reciting her supplications most devoutly for the sake of an unknown girl who was buried in a graveyard in a distant land thousands of miles away. While watching her doing all this, I suddenly missed Iman most intensely. The feeling that I would never be able to meet Iman again in this world began cutting through my heart as if with a sharp dagger. Overwhelmed with this feeling, I began shedding tears. As Sarah turned and saw my tearful eyes, she said, "O Hammad, what's all this?"

She almost ran to me, held my face in her hands and began wiping away my tears. Her tender and affectionate touch broke all the barriers that had hitherto been holding back the flood of tears in my eyes and then, for a long time, tears went on gushing forth from my eyes and she with her delicate hands went on wiping them away. In her desperate attempts to console me, she herself seemed utterly exhausted and finally, she pressed my head against her shoulder and decided to allow all the water stored up in my eyes to flow out. At last, she spoke in her soft soothing voice. "I regard your pain as my own and wish to remedy it as much as I can. If you like, you may open out your heart to me."

As I told her the woeful tale of my love from the beginning to the end, she listened to it silently. On a number of occasions in this process, I had a feeling that she herself would burst into tears, but in a courageous manner, she controlled her nerves and prevented herself from breaking down, because she knew that if she too lost heart, it would be impossible for me to save myself from total collapse. Even after I had finished my story, she spent a lot of time trying to keep her nerves under control. I could very well imagine the feelings in the heart of that tender and delicate girl but she did not allow me to become aware of the violent storms of passions raging inside her. At times, the silence between two persons proves to be a more effective medium of communication than words and sentences and same was the case with us at that time. For a long time, she silently sat with me, holding my hands and trying to communicate her words and meanings to me through her soft soothing touch. Finally, when the whiteness of the dawn became visible from the large windows and ventilators of the synagogue, we came out. The white cover of snow over the whole city had a dazzling impact on our eyes. The foot prints that we had left on the snow during the previous night while going into the synagogue could still be seen. The darkness of the night has its own magical effects which had forced me to lay bare all the feelings of my heart to Sarah inside the synagogue. But as soon as the morning approached, I began to feel some embarrassment at my condition during the night. Sarah however, seemed fully determined to honour my feelings and without saying anything about the events of the night, she dropped me at my apartment at the time when London was still sleeping soundly. ? As I got down from the car, a milkman who was carrying bottles of milk on a bicycle passed by me and wished me good morning in English. Then with a smile, he looked towards Sarah who understood the meaning of his smile and became somewhat embarrassed. She was still sitting on the steering seat. I bent down on the side window and said, “I don’t wish to lower the value of your rare feelings by using such ordinary words as thank you. I’ll always remember this night.”

Sarah looked into my eyes and spoke gently. “There’s no need for any thanks. I’ve always considered you quite different from others. The fact is that after the events of last night the respect which I have in my heart for you has increased to the highest level. Remember that whenever you need me, you’ll always find me with you even before your calling me.”

“I know that it will always happen like this and this feeling will be of utmost value and importance for me.”

During the previous evening, while I was returning from the library, I had gone to the theatre with Sarah in her car. The bag full of my notes was still lying on the back seat of her car. I had completed my term paper while I was in the library in the evening. For two months, I had worked untiringly to complete my research work in the form of this term paper. I brought out the file of all the notes from the bag and handed it over to Sarah. “Here’s my term paper. I want you to keep it with you. If due to certain reason, I’m unable to submit this term paper, I hope you’ll submit it on my behalf so that it may become a part of the library’s record.”

In astonishment, she began turning over the pages of the file. “Why are you saying such things? I’ve no hesitation in keeping it with me. But I’m sure that both of us would submit it together. Besides this, I’ll compel Papa to allow you to read out your paper in the presence of all the university students at a special ceremony, because, you’re fully entitled to present your views before others.”

Instead of disturbing her by telling her about the activities of Peter the Librarian, I gently scattered her silky hair with my hands, which brought smile on her face. Then, I waved my hand to bid her farewell and she went away in her car. I stood there watching her car turning into another direction from the last corner of my deserted street. When I went upstairs, I found that Kamran had got up and was ready to go to his work. Giving me a mug of hot coffee he remarked, “So my prince has finally returned home after the whole night’s merry making. I’ve warned you several times to steer clear of that charming Jewish girl. But all my warnings seem to have fallen on your deaf ears. In the beginning, you used to spend your days in her company. But now even your nights are being spent

under her spell. Medi dear, why don't you understand the simple fact that her father is a very powerful and influential Jew? I wonder how he has tolerated your presence in the university."

Perhaps, from the window of his flat, Kamran had seen me getting down from Sarah's car. When I informed him of what Joseph had told me about Peter the Librarian, he rebuked the Jews in his own typical style and remarked, "For this very reason, I've been constantly advising you not to have any row with these people. You're fully aware of the laws of this country. You may be even deported from England at Peter's complaint against you. Jews have invested huge amounts of money in all the industries and businesses of this country and the law will surely be on their side. After the 9-11 attacks, they regard every Muslim as a terrorist. In response to the slightest complaint against a Muslim they react most swiftly and declare him a terrorist. A large number of Muslims have already been deported only on the basis of suspicion. I'm at a loss to understand as to why you're so keen to write your term paper on the subject of Holocaust. If the Jews insist that millions of Jews were killed in the holocaust, let them say so and to hell with them. Which treasures and medals are you expecting to get by denying the idea of holocaust? Moreover, even if you get a chance to read out your term paper in the presence of other students, who will appreciate or believe your research, because, most of them would be Jews who themselves have concocted the fictitious tale of holocaust?"

"Even if no one is ready to believe in the authenticity of my research, at least, I believe in it. The fact is that they themselves know about the real truth, but the problem is that no one has ever been courageous enough to expose this truth to them. But I'm determined to expose this truth, whatever the consequences may be. Even if a single student at the university agrees with my views, I'll be sure to have achieved my objective. I don't care whether after this they burn my term paper or expel me from the country."

Kamran seems frustrated. "But what's the use of this whole struggle? For whom are you embarking upon this hazardous adventure? Who's going to benefit from your laborious research? What's the purpose of this whole effort?"

I was infuriated at his words. "So you believe that whatever I've just said to you is meaningless and purposeless? Don't you understand that a great benefit of my research is that it would enable the young generation to become aware of a flagrant lie which the Jews have been telling the whole world for decades? Another far more important objective of my research is to tell the people that the Jews propounded the myth of holocaust only to transform into reality their dream of establishing an independent Jewish state on the Palestinian land. All preparations for staging this drama had been made by them by the end of the First World War. It was the time when the Jews initiated a world wide campaign for raising funds needed for the accomplishment of their mission. The American, British and Russian political leaders were fully aware of the fact that although the Germans had been defeated and humiliated in the First World War, yet they would surely strike back. In order to prevent this eventuality, they conspired with the German Jews and urged them to act treacherously against Germany. Under the charismatic leadership of Hitler, the Germans started regrouping and soon, Hitler's real ambitions became evident from his massive military preparations. In these circumstances, American and European leaders who were hostile to Germany joined hands with the Jews and in order to win their support against Hitler, they promised to enable them to have their own Jewish state in the Palestinian territories including Jerusalem. At the end of the Second World War Hitler and his defeated German troops were accused of massacring millions of Jews in the Holocaust. But the Muslims of Palestine had to pay its price in the form of Jewish settlements and the Jewish state of Israel. If Hitler and his Nazi troops were responsible for the Holocaust, why did the Jews punish the Palestinian Muslims for the alleged wrong doings of Hitler? The simple fact is that the genocide of five to six million Jews during the Second World War is a false, fictitious and baseless story. It was virtually impossible for the Germans to build so many gas chambers. As a matter of fact, these gas chambers had been built during the War to dispose off the bodies of the German soldiers. Moreover, the Germans who had dumped all their resources into the War did not have

adequate supplies of coal and other things required for operating these gas chambers. In fact, the Zionist Jews themselves concocted the tale of holocaust and gave a highly exaggerated version of the Jews killed during the War, only to achieve their own vested interests. By projecting themselves as innocent victims of aggression and persecution, they attempted to gain maximum benefits. As long as they are successful in their false and exaggerated propaganda, the Muslims of Palestine will continue to bear the brunt. The Jews started their propaganda campaign about the holocaust for the sake of their economic interests and for grabbing the Muslim lands and so far, they are highly successful in their propaganda. Now the situation is that the whole world regards their lie as truth while our truth is considered to be a lie. Someone has to take the initiative and try to show the real truth to the world. Remember that our decline started on that very day when we began considering ourselves in terms of Palestinians, Arabs, Egyptians and Pakistanis instead of Muslims. You know very well that the loss of a Jew living in one corner of the world is regarded as a personal loss by the Jews living in the rest of the world. But why can't the Muslims adopt a similar attitude?"

Standing at the same place and without saying a single word, Kamran listened to my whole speech. At last, I also became exhausted and fell down on the sofa. Soon afterwards, I felt the pressure of Kamran's hand on my shoulder and as I looked towards him, He pulled my arm, made me stand up and hugged me. "Why is it that you always win every battle single handedly? Since childhood, you've been defeating me but today's defeat has been the most enjoyable of all. If you've got such a supreme objective in your mind and if you intend to awaken the sense of loss in the hearts of the Muslims, no sacrifice should be spared for the completion of this noble mission. With my limited vision, how could I be far sighted enough to probe into the greatness of your project?"

"I've never claimed to be a staunch Muslim or a perfect Believer. But while living here among the Jews, I've realized that we the Muslims have got something very special, which frightens and annoys the Jews. I'm treading on this dangerous path only to explore that special feature of ours. I want you to pray for me to remain steadfast in my journey. I may be the first drop of rain but I must fall because some other drops of rain may also fall after me. These few drops of rain may wash away some of the rust which has been on our hearts for centuries."

Kamran patted me on my back encouragingly and said, "I'm sure that the rust of our heart would be removed. Even the worst rust in the world is bound to perish if washed with such a holy water."

Both Kamran and I had spent our lives in a carefree mood but today while talking to each other, we were sure that something very serious had touched our hearts. Perhaps, this is how our lives take sudden turns and our hearts are revolutionized. Perhaps, this is how the rust of our hearts is always in need of some holy water for its removal. While I was still engrossed in such thoughts, I fell asleep. Sleep is indeed, one of the greatest blessings of God as it temporarily conceals every rust of the heart. And gives man the opportunity to avoid looking towards himself.

CHAPTER 32

THE FIRST BATTLE

The moment I entered the University the next morning, I realized that its atmosphere was somewhat changed. First of all, I saw Jim, who quickly came to me, caught my hand and said, "Hi Medi, don't worry. We're all with you and if needed, we'll bring about an earthquake in the whole University. Within a few minutes, all the students crowded around me and began assuring me of their unequivocal support and co-operation. As I was trying to comprehend this new situation, my name was announced on the loud speaker and I was summoned by the dean sir Isaac in his office. As I entered Isaac's room, the first man whom I saw sitting there with him was Peter, in charge of the library in the Central Square. The moment he saw me, an ironical smile appeared on his lips and Isaac started speaking. "Come on Mr. Hammad, I hope by now, you must have read the note against you at the University's notice board."

It then became clear to me that the students had gathered around me outside the office after reading the news about me on the notice board.

"No sir, I've just arrived at the University and haven't read the notice board. Please tell me something about it."

"But before that, I would like to ask you a question. Suppose you are the chief executive of an educational institution and you come to know that some students are deliberately encouraging religious politics in the institution, which may create unrest in the city. How would you handle that situation?"

"In such a situation, I would conduct a full and unbiased inquiry into the matter and decide the case on the basis of merit and justice. I expect to get justice from you, because being the head of the institution; you have the additional duties of the chief inquiry officer. I know that you are an efficient teacher and a just administrator."

Sir Isaac carefully looked towards me, as if trying to find some traces of irony or bitterness on my face. Then, he shook his head and asked me if I had ever met Mr. Peter.

"Yes sir, I've often met him during my visits to the Central Square Library."

"Did you go to that library in the evening on January 13?"

"Yes sir. I needed two articles which could be very helpful to me in the completion of my term paper."

"Mr. Peter has filed a written application against you that you subjected him to religious harassment and threatened him with serious consequences when he could not provide you your required books. Although he feels that his life is in danger, he has been kind enough not to report the matter to the London police or administration, to save the University's reputation. He has approached me in the hope of getting justice. What do you say about it?"

"It's a lie. I've never harassed him nor have I ever tried to threaten him."

"Do you have some evidence to prove your innocence?"

"Innocence never requires any evidence or proofs. Evidence has to be provided by the accuser."

Sir Isaac cast a glance on me from behind the thin glasses of his spectacles, as if trying to note the level of my confidence in that difficult situation. "Your arguments carry weight but Mr. Peter doesn't have personal rivalry with you and there's no need for him to accuse you without any reason."

"I also want to know why he is accusing me. I hope he'll produce some evidence to prove the authenticity of his accusations."

"All right, but in the meantime, you should file your written reply and remember that the University Administration is keen to decide this matter before it is reported to the police. According to the laws of the University, if a student is involved in any police case, he is immediately expelled from the University."

"Yes sir. I know it very well. But it is also in my knowledge that one clause of the same law states that the charges against such a student must be proved before his expulsion from the University. Anyhow, I'll submit my written response. Thank you."

Having said this, I came out of the room and saw Sarah quickly going towards the Dean's room. Perhaps, she had just reached the University and as soon as she saw me, she rushed towards me. "O Hammad, what's all this? Is the University going to stage another anti-Hammad drama?"

I briefly told her about Peter's complaint against me and about the incident that had taken place at the library.

"What's the name of that librarian?" She asked in astonishment.

"Peter."

"Peter Thomas. He's an old friend of my father. For several years, he has been coming to our home on religious festivals."

There was a sudden flash of lightning in my mind. It was evident that sir Isaac had not yet forgotten the humiliation that he had to face at my hands in the incident involving Jim. He was the master mind behind this whole conspiracy. He wanted to kill two birds with one stone. He deliberately attempted to make my personality controversial and suspicious in the eyes of the University administration. Moreover, he was hoping that in case of my expulsion from the University, he would get rid of my term paper that had been the main source of worry for him. Sarah had also understood the whole situation and she dashed towards her father's room grinding her teeth. But I caught her hand. "No Sarah, I don't wish that once again due to me, a daughter should have another row with her father. It would further injure his egotistical feelings."

Sarah looked towards me in surprise and anger. "Are you still thinking about his egotistical feelings and his relationship with me, despite knowing that he is bent upon expelling you from the University and perhaps, from this country as well?"

"I know it very well. This time he has struck me with a deadly blow but even then, I don't want to show a rash and disproportionate reaction. He's fighting a legal battle in a wise and prudent manner and I'll fight with him in his own style."

Sarah tightened her grip on my hand. "Not just you but both of us will fight this battle." I was startled at her words. "The path is thorny and the journey is arduous."

"I'm not afraid of counting the blisters of my feet. Didn't you say the other day that those who think in terms of profit and loss are traders? And you know that I've never been a trader."

The firm resolution which was evident at that moment from her eyes and from her tone was sufficient to crush the mountains into powder. I scattered her neatly arranged hair and she smiled. In the meantime, sir Isaac came out of the room to say good-bye to Peter. On seeing Sarah's scattered hair and her looking towards me with a smiling face, the colour of his face changed for a moment. But he knew well the art of concealing and controlling his feelings. After saying good-bye to Peter, he shut the door. Without seeing Sarah, Peter went into another direction.

I wondered what my father might have thought if he had come to know that all the Jews of London were finding themselves in a difficult situation because of my term paper. Religion had never been given any particular importance in our family. Far from offering the five daily prayers, the members of my family used to go to the mosque on Fridays and on Eid days only to make a show of themselves. They regarded the Quran as a holy book, not for the sake of getting guidance but for the sake of placing it with full reverence in the highly decorated shelves. It was brought down from the shelf for the last time on the eve of my elder sister's marriage only as a formality. I will always remember an incident that took place when I was about 15 or 16 years of age. I took a fancy to a Hindu class fellow of mine named Kamni. One day, she came to our home to attend my birthday. A Maulvi used to come to our home in those days in order to teach us the Holy Quran. He used to force us to perform ablution and offer the Asr Prayer with him. When Kamni arrived that evening, we were standing for the Asr Prayer with him. As soon as I saw Kamni, I cut short my Prayer and ran to another room, so that she might not be able to see me offering the Prayer. In fact, I never liked to offer my Prayers in the presence of any of my girl friends. I had a strange feeling in my heart that if my girl friends saw me offering the Prayers, they would not get a good impression of my personality.

That evening, my father went on laughing for a long time when I told him how on seeing Kamni, I had cut short my Prayer and run away to hide in another room .

That morning, when Peter came to the University, I realized the fact that a large number of students were eager to read and hear my term paper, because the rash and unwise actions of the university administration against me had significantly increased the curiosity of all the students about it. They were forced to think that there must be something very special in my term paper, which had compelled the University administration to prevent me from reading it in public. Apparently, it was a simple term paper like so many other term papers which were submitted every year only to be buried under the heaps of dust in the shelves of the university library. But sir Isaac made a major mistake by preventing me from reading it in public because by doing so, he had considerably flared up the curiosity of the students about my term paper and its subject matter. They were all curious to know and hear what I had to say on this topic. If my term paper had been treated as any other ordinary term paper and if I had been allowed to read it in the presence of other students, it might have proved controversial, but it would not have had that impact on the students which it was having now when I had been prohibited from reading it publicly.

That evening, while I was sitting on my favourite bench along the canal and watching the birds diving in the water, Rebecca also came there. On her black skirt, she was wearing a beautiful shirt having white floral patterns. In this dress, she herself looked like a flower. Her red eyes indicated that she had been weeping. For a long time, both of us remained silent for a while and then she spoke, "Do I still have the right to apologize to you?"

In astonishment I looked towards her. "Friends have got every right except the right of apologizing. This right can never be granted to them because it is never required in the case of true friendship. A good friend can never be wrong and, therefore, there can be no question of any apology or forgiveness."

"No. It was I who made a big mistake but I knew about your large heartedness and your possible response to my apology."

"Don't say such things now. We've met after so many days, say something else."

"No Medi, let me say it now, otherwise, it will always torture me like a sharp thorn. On that day when you told me that you were already passionately in love with someone else, I was filled with a bitter feeling of jealousy. I thought that it was Sarah who had captured your heart and mind and, therefore, I was very much annoyed with her. But yesterday, when Sarah told me about Iman, I was overwhelmed with the feelings of embarrassment and shame at my own attitude. It then became clear to me that my love is only superficial while you loved someone in the real sense of the word. As far as humble people like me and others are concerned, none of us can claim to have passed through even the first phase of love. So how can we expect to reach the evening of love?"

With her bent head, Rebecca went on shedding tears for a long time, while her hand was in the firm grip of my hand. "No Rebi, that's not the case. Within a single moment, you've crossed the three stages of love and reached its evening; otherwise, you wouldn't have been sitting with me here this evening and making such confessions. In fact, you fully deserve to enjoy the cold and sweet evening of love, which is hovering somewhere around you."

Rebecca again burst into tears. "No Medi, that's not the case with me. If it had been so, my heart wouldn't have been filled with such an agonizing pain and crippling sorrow, nor would I have been shedding tears in your presence like some timid and less courageous person. I'm so unfortunate and ungrateful that I couldn't appreciate the real worth and value of your rare and unique friendship. In the hope of winning your love, I rejected your friendship. Never forgive me for this love. Never have any mercy on me for this crime."

She was now weeping hysterically. I pressed her head against my shoulder and allowed her to weep as much as she wanted. When the sharp thorns of love injure the whole body, the severity of their pain can be reduced to a certain extent only by means of the flood of salty tears. Perhaps, the deadly poison of love is also salty like tears.

On the next day, I came to know that in order to prove the authenticity of his claim, Peter had presented two of his subordinates at the library before the University administration as witnesses. Of course, both of them were Jews. I was temporarily barred from taking classes because, as long as the inquiry against me was going on, the University administration could not afford to see further unrest at the campus. When this news spread in the University, all the students of my class came out and began chanting slogans in my favour. They were holding large banners and placards with the words "Justice, justice justice" written on them. The infuriated protesters were led by Jim and Rebecca. In their outrage and fury, they were threatening that if I was not allowed to attend my classes, together with all the students of the University, they would go out on the roads and spread this strike to all the educational institutions of London. Protesting students could be seen everywhere in the University grounds, along the canal, in the corridors and even on the roofs. When I came out of the class, their slogans became noisier. Tears appeared in my eyes while watching all of them fighting for a foreign boy. At that moment, I felt as if Iman appeared from behind a pillar and began talking to me. "Hammad, didn't I tell you that you would never be alone. I'll always be with you in the form of love and friendship. My love will continue to hover around you in different forms and manifestations. I'll make you such a reliable and lovable person that wherever you go, people would always be willing to lay down their lives for you. My love will always give you a protective cover of greatness and security."

On seeing me standing with tearful eyes, Jim came forward and held me in his arms and the whole University began echoing with loud slogans. As tears flowed out from my eyes, Jim further tightened his grip on my body, while Rebecca wiped away my tears with her handkerchief. Then, she came closer to me and whispered into my ears, "O my rebellious boy, don't worry, we're all with you."

I looked around in search of Sarah but she was not seen anywhere. In the meantime, it was announced from the dean's room that I must immediately go there. The noise of the students arose once again and all of them accompanied me towards the Dean's room. One of my hands was in Rebecca's hand while Jim was holding my other hand. Leaving all of them outside the room, I went in and saw Sarah who was going out of the room with her face red with rage. She collided with me while I was still standing in the door. While going out of the room, she caught my hand for a moment, looked straight into my eyes and said, "Don't worry. They can't do any harm to you. On behalf of all the students of the University, I have given a call for strike and informed the administration about it. Now, we'll see how they can expel you from this university."

Sarah left my hand and went out while inside the room, sir Isaac was walking about in a furious mood. The sight of me talking to his daughter, almost disfigured his face with anger and frustration. Two other members of the jury were also sitting on the other side of the table. In extreme anger, sir Isaac looked towards me and roared, "Have you seen Mr. Hammad Amjad Raza the way in which the discipline of this university is being shattered for the first time only because of you? I can't bear all this. You have tarnished the image of this university and for the first time, students have become courageous enough to defy my orders. I believe that you alone are responsible for this whole mess."

I calmly listened to whatever he was saying. "Sir, how can you say so? I came to the University only half an hour ago while all these students have been present here around your office since nine in the morning."

"You're such a dangerous person that your presence or absence doesn't make any difference. You have the ability to mislead and incite them even in your absence. Your presence is a constant danger for the peace and security of this university."

If it had been in his power at that moment, he would have felt no hesitation in eliminating me from the face of the earth. I again spoke in a low gentle tone. "Sir, you seem to be habitual of making one-sided decisions. By means of your unilateral decision, you barred me from attending my classes but I didn't protest against it, because I wanted the inquiry to go ahead smoothly without any interruption. Even now I'm ready to face the jury's verdict whatever it may be."

My answer made him literally speechless and he could do nothing except grinding his teeth. By provoking and intimidating me, in the presence of other jury members, he wanted to achieve some objectives, but by now, I had fully understood all his tricks and twists and known how to deal with him.

Members of the jury informed me that they had granted me the permission to resume taking my classes unconditionally, but I would not be able to deposit my term paper in the record of the University's library. However, they added that this restriction might be lifted if the inquiry committee decided the case in my favour. After announcing their decision, members of the jury requested me to try to control the students and compel them to go to their classes. The reason was that the agitation of the students was likely to cross the boundaries of the University and in that case, it would be a serious blow to the University's reputation. I promised that I would appeal to the students to call off their strike. Members of the jury went out of the room and I also stood up to go. Sir Isaac who was still restlessly walking about in the room called me from behind. "Mr. Hammad, Sarah is my only daughter and is very dear to me, but she is still somewhat foolish. Her mother and I have decided that she should be married the next year to a boy who belongs to our own family and who is the centre of all our hopes. Hopefully, till that time, you would be at the University and attend her marriage ceremony as her best friend."

"You need not worry sir. Sarah is indeed my best friend and I'll surely attend her marriage, even if it requires me to come here again from my country. I'll be eagerly waiting for your invitation card."

Thus, in England as well, besides religion, a loving father was battling against me. He was apprehensive that I might take away her beloved daughter from him. Do the parents of all the girls think in the same manner? In Quetta, there was Maulvi Alimuddin and here in London, there was Isaac, thinking in the same manner. With a great deal of difficulty, I prevailed upon the protesting students to return to their classes. Jim was determined to continue the agitation till all the charges against me were dropped and I had to request him most humbly to end the strike for the time being. Rebecca was outraged when she heard that I had agreed not to submit my term paper. I tried to make her understand that the whole conspiracy had been designed to prevent me from submitting my term paper, but I did not want Jim or any other student to suffer in any way because of me. The best option available to me at that time was to wait for the verdict of the inquiry committee. Standing silently, Sarah was hearing all this discussion but it was evident from the expressions on her face that she was lost in some deep thoughts. She seemed to be contemplating on several questions which were cropping up in her mind, but was unable to ask any of these questions openly. A bitter conflict seemed to be going on in her mind. I cast an inquisitive look on her and snapped my fingers to bring her out of her reverie. "Hey Miss Isaac, you see, how terribly people are afraid of us. The word Muslim has never been as frightening for the world as it is now. Your father has already invited me to attend your marriage which is likely to take place some time next year. He's afraid that I might elope with you. Both Sarah and Rebecca laughed. After heaving a cold sigh Rebecca remarked, "Alas, sir Isaac doesn't know that you may not elope with some girl but several girls like me are waiting for a suitable opportunity to elope with you."

Her funny remarks were bringing smiles on all the faces but I noticed that Sarah was still lost in her own deep and complex thoughts.

The main hall of the University was jam-packed with students that day. After submitting their term papers, all the students had gathered there, because some of them who had been selected by the administration were given the prestigious honour of reading out their research papers publicly in the presence of all the students. It was decided that only those three students who had secured the first three positions in the previous semester would present their research before the audience on that occasion. It was a grand ceremony with the mayor of London as the chief guest. In view of the much publicized confrontation between me and the administration that had been going on during the past few days, the number of people attending the function had increased considerably. Perhaps, the news of this row had reached far and wide. Of course, in this age of science and technology, it is extremely

difficult to keep the people ignorant of some important event. Like the previous years, a large number of reporters and photographers were also present on that occasion, to highlight the importance of this annual ceremony of the University. Only a handful of them knew me by face but as Joseph told me, all of them had heard my name and were eager to know more about me. After some time, Sir Isaac appeared on the stage, thanked the chief guest and announced the names of those people who had been donating millions of pounds each year to the university. Most of them were Jews and were present in the first row of the guests sitting in the hall. The children of many of them were studying at the same University. When the ceremony officially began, some brilliant students were awarded medals and certificates for their exceptional ability and extraordinary performance. Afterwards, those students who had been selected by the administration were invited to come on the stage and read out their research based term papers. Sarah's name was also included in the list of these students, because as usual, she had got the first position in the previous semester. First of all, a female student named Jenny Fox read out her paper on Economics. It was highly appreciated and applauded by the audience. Afterwards, a First Year student named Martin presented his research about the old buildings of London. It was also an excellent paper which also received loud applause from the listeners. Then, Sarah was invited to come on the stage. She was clad in black coat and black trousers. Besides her white shirt, her favourite red scarf could also be seen in her neck. Once, she had told me that she loved to wear that red scarf only on special occasions. Her long hair had been tightly tied at the back of her head and if seen from a distance, she looked like the student of a convent school. When her name was announced, all the students of my class, especially Jim and Rebecca made a lot of noise. With a smiling face, she went up the stage in a very confident mood. After thanking all the guests and the chief guest who was presiding over the ceremony, she turned over the first page of her paper which was placed on the glass rostrum in front of her. "As all of you know very well that the topic of my paper is "Holocaust, a myth or reality?" Three months ago, I won a prize on the basis of the first part of this paper. Today, I would like to present to you its second part. I hope all of you would listen to me attentively."

Sitting in the first row, sir Isaac was happily and proudly observing the confident style of his daughter. He informed the mayor and some other special guests sitting near him that she was his daughter. All of them nodded their heads in appreciation. Sarah continued her lecture: "I feel no hesitation in admitting the fact that while I was writing the first part of the paper, I mainly concentrated on gathering the relevant material instead of focusing on research. Perhaps, till that time, I was not in the habit of doing real research, or it may be that after becoming habitual of seeing only one side of the picture, I didn't feel the need of having a look at its other side. But today's paper of mine is fully based on research and is full of solid arguments. My father sir Isaac has always taught me that I should always hear and speak the truth without any fear and the fact is that if today, I'm proudly standing before you on this stage, it's only because of him, who is not only my father but also my best teacher."

She received enthusiastic applause from all the people sitting in the hall and her father was immensely elated at her performance. After reading the first page of her paper, she turned over the next page. "While conducting my research on the concept of holocaust, I noticed a strange type of confrontation between myth and reality, truth and hypothesis. This confrontation was going on outside as well as inside my mind. For the first time in my life I observed that some people are extremely reluctant to hear and speak the truth. But then a strange man who came into our life changed everything for me. After Papa, he was the second man who taught me the lesson of truth. I also came to know how a person can be courageous enough to stand resolutely on the side of truth despite facing hostility from the whole world. The research paper that I'm going to read out to you isn't my research. It is in fact the research conducted by that same truthful man named Hammad Raza."

Her words seemed to have caused a bomb explosion in the hall which was filled with deafening noise. In extreme anger and frustration, sir Isaac stood up and shouted to someone to switch off the

microphone. But by that time, Jim and David had seized control of the audio system working in the hall. Sarah's dramatic action had an electrifying impact on the dozing photographers and reporters who began taking the snaps of Sarah her father and other people. The Mayor whispered something into Isaac's ears. Perhaps, he wanted to draw his attention towards the news reporters and photographers. Wringing his hands in utter helplessness, sir Isaac again sat down on his seat. For me too, it was nothing less than a sudden explosion. I could never imagine that instead of presenting her own research paper, Sarah would read out mine. . It was impossible to imagine the extent of the courage of that apparently delicate girl. In her defiant mood, she continued her speech: "David Ben-Gurion, the leader of the Zionist World Order and first Prime Minister of Israel, laid the basis of the propaganda of holocaust. He accused the German Nazi leader Adolf Hitler of exterminating millions of Jews during the Second World War. The reason was that the British and American leaders had promised with the Jews that at the end of the war, they would be given their own independent state in Palestine."

As Sarah continued the reading of my term paper, a strange silence prevailed in the hall. "The question is why was this allegation brought against Hitler and the German troops? It is obvious that Hitler had a strong hatred for the Jews who were expelled from Germany after the First World War. The control of arms and ammunition factories was taken away from the Jews. They were removed from all the key posts which they had been holding in the country and replaced by the Germans. In this way, the Jews turned bitterly against Germany. This anti-Semitic attitude was seen at that time not only in Germany but also in Rumania and other European countries. The idea of holocaust also evolved in the same circumstances. In the beginning, after going through several pro-holocaust books, I began to regard holocaust as a true story. But in the light of Hammad Raza's research, I can say it with full confidence and without any hesitation that none of the Jewish writers, scholars and researchers has ever been able to present even a single solid proof in support of their claim that five to six million Jews were killed by the Nazis during the Second World War. No doubt, Jews were killed by the Germans during the War, but all the reliable and authentic evidence proves beyond any doubt that the number of Jews killed at that time was not more than a few thousand."

Sir Isaac made another futile attempt to go out of the hall, but by that time, even those people who had been standing outside the hall had also come in. There was so much rush of people near the door and in the passage between the seats that he was left with no option but to stay at his own place in the room. In the meantime, Sarah continued her speech: "Another important question that arises in our minds is that if the Nazis had massacred such a large number of Jews, why was it not reported in the Newspapers and magazines of that time? After a detailed study of all the notable newspapers, journals and magazines published during the War and immediately afterwards, I have not been able to find even a single story of any such mass murder of Jews published anywhere in the world not even in the countries which were opposed to Germany during the War. When the Germans were killing the Jews on such a large scale, (as it is said), why was the world press silent about it? The third notable question in this connection is that if German Nazis were responsible for the widespread massacre of Jews, why did the Jews migrated to Palestine, Jerusalem and the Golan Heights shortly after the War? Instead of punishing the Germans, why were the innocent Muslims of Palestine persecuted and deprived of their homes and lands where they had been living for centuries? It is true that every Jew regards Jerusalem as something more sacred than his own life. But is it necessary for the Jews to try to legitimize their mass migration towards Jerusalem by means of the false and fictitious tale of Holocaust? If Germans were the real culprits in the eyes of the Jews, why didn't they (the Jews) take any considerable action against them even after the capitulation of Germany in the War?"

After this, Sarah read out the names of all those books from which I had gathered the evidence against the idea of holocaust and urged all the students to go through these books in order to fully understand the matter. I'm sure that during the past few days, Sarah herself must have read all the books which were my source materials and on which I had laid the foundation of my research.

Summing up her speech, Sarah remarked, “The question is not whether holocaust is a myth or reality. The question is why are our people so much afraid of presenting the truth and hearing it? I call upon all the representatives of this new generation to come forward and unveil the truth. If a few decades ago, our ancestors made false statements to achieve certain objectives, is it necessary for us to follow their footsteps and remain in the world of lies and deceptions? We must march forward and try to explore the real truth. The term paper written by Hammad Amjad Raza is only the first step in this direction. Through his research, he has invited our new generation to take our own initiatives to find out the real truth. Nowhere in his paper has he categorically rejected the idea of the holocaust. He has only highlighted the loopholes on this idea and raised some objections about its authenticity. He is of the view that if the cruelties and atrocities of a nation are proved, it is an act of injustice to take the revenge from another nation through a conspiracy. The term paper written by Hammad cannot bring about any change in the boundaries of Israel, because what is done cannot be undone. However, by means of our honest assessment of the whole situation, we can pinpoint those who deliberately told lies on certain occasions to mislead the people for their own vested interests. If three generations ago people did something good or bad, why should we try to defend their actions? If we are really interested in promoting peace and prosperity in the world, our youngsters must come forward and play their due role in this movement. It doesn’t matter whether they are Jews or Muslims, Europeans or Americans, Asians or Africans. We must take our own bold and truthful initiatives for peace, instead of bothering about what the ancestors of a nation or race did in the past. They might have done something which they considered to be right but which was proved wrong by the time. Whatever they did, good or bad, has now become a story of the past. But we have to live in the present and think about the future. If we continue to conceal or justify the wrong doings and crimes of our forefathers, it would become a greater crime because we are doing it intentionally and deliberately, though at the time they were committed, their perpetrators might not have regarded them as crimes or wrong doings. I call upon all the members of my generation that they may belong to any community, race or religion, but instead of blindly believing in the authenticity or falsehood of Holocaust or any other concept or theory, they must conduct their own unbiased, honest and thorough research into the matter. Instead of constantly living under the dark and ominous shadow of hatred and hostilities created by our forefathers, we must build up our own friendships on the basis of our own realistic and truthful ideas.”

After reading the last page of my term paper, as Sarah stepped forward to come down from the stage, death-like silence prevailed in the hall for a long time. Then, the mayor of London who was acting as the chief guest, stood up and clapped for Sarah. Within no time, the hall was reverberating with thunderous applause, loud cheers and emotionally charged slogans in praise of Sarah and her courage. As all the photographers became busy taking her snaps, she herself got down from the stage, came to me, gave me my term paper and said with a smiling face, “Here’s your term paper. I’ve fulfilled my promise. Each and every student of this university will receive a copy of your term paper before the setting of the sun this evening. You invited all of us to embark on the journey of truth and today, I’ve taken the first step on this road. I’m sure that within a short period, you will be accompanied by hundreds of thousands of other people eager to make their contributions to the success of your glorious mission. We were surrounded by a huge crowd of students, news reporters and our personal friends. Photographers were taking our snaps while reporters were asking us all sorts of questions. All of a sudden, amidst this noise and clamour, I saw Iman standing in front of me instead of Sarah. As I looked towards her in astonishment, I felt as if the whole crowd had suddenly become silent and motionless. With her typical smile, Iman spoke to me in her soft and gentle voice, “Didn’t I say to you that love conquers all?”

The very next moment, Iman was again replaced by Sarah. We were encircled by Rebecca, Tina, Jim and other students, who wanted to save us from the rush and push of the crowd. As I scattered Sarah’s hair with my fingers, she smiled and with her, the whole world and the whole universe also smiled.

CHAPTER 33

THE YOUTH REVOLUTION

After witnessing the dramatic events at the University that day, I accompanied Rebecca to a hotel, where she had invited her special friends to dinner, in order to celebrate the occasion. It was almost midnight when I finally returned home and went to bed. Later, I was suddenly roused from my sleep when Kamran came into my room in a very excited and cheerful mood. "So my prince has arrived back and is sleeping soundly after igniting fire in the whole city."

"Didn't you go to your restaurant today?" I asked him looking towards him with my eyes full of sleep.

"I'm coming back from the same place, which is also thronged with your ardent admirers, who are all eager to have a glimpse of yours. All the newspapers have given extensive coverage to the speech made by that beautiful Jewish girl at the University yesterday. The photographs of both of you have appeared in all the newspapers. I can say with full confidence and without any hesitation that if you announced your participation in the coming elections, you will be elected as Mayor unopposed. The fact is that when these white youngsters award the title of hero to someone, it's not so easy to deprive him of this title."

Kamran gave me a bundle of that morning's newspapers. The first page of each newspaper carried large photographs of Sarah making speech in the University hall and returning my term paper to me in the presence of all the people. There were several other pictures of both of us in the newspapers. Almost all the newspapers had described Sarah's speech and the whole incident as the start of "Youth revolution." On the other hand, the newspapers owned, published and financed by the Jews bitterly condemned Sarah's speech and my term paper on the subject of Holocaust and dismissed the whole incident as sheer sentimentality. But at that time, the criticism and condemnation of such newspapers also contributed to the increase in our popularity. By means of her extraordinary courage, Sarah had conveyed my views to every nook and corner of the city and I was sure that through the newspapers and internet, they would reach the whole world within the next 24 hours. The incident had triggered a new debate among the youngsters who were urging their elders to assist them in their struggle for exploring and spreading the truth. Sarah had rightly said that the caravan of truth had started its unstoppable journey. In fact, she herself was leading that caravan. Some pro-Jewish newspapers attempted to defame me by giving an exaggerated account of my baseless dispute with Peter the librarian. Moreover, such newspapers had tried to give another colour to the whole incident by highlighting a photograph in which I was shown scattering Sarah's hair. Thus, the war had started and nobody could know how long it would go and what would be its outcome. Some newspapers had even gone to the extent of stating that I was a dangerous agent of a terrorist nation and had come to the University with a special agenda given to me by my nation. However, most of the newspapers had appreciated my message of unbiased thinking and research in order to find out the real truth. They congratulated Sarah, applauded her exceptional courage and described her as a brilliant girl who was bold enough to defy all the conventionalities even in the teeth of strongest opposition from the whole world. It was evident that I was achieving my objective. I had sparked off a debate and I knew that in the times to come, it would force the youngsters to reconsider their age-old beliefs and ideas. At the same time, the newspapers had pointed out some incidents which were quite alarming for me. Some incidents of violence had taken place in the outskirts of the city and in the Jewish settlements, in reaction to Sarah's speech. It was quite astonishing for me that the whole world was consistently describing the Muslims as terrorists, extremists, militants and fundamentalists, without taking any notice of the narrow minded and violent Jews, who were trying to provoke racial prejudice, only because a Jewish girl had taken the side of truth.

As I woke up that day, I knew that I had to go to the University at two o'clock, but Kamran did not allow me to go alone, because he was much concerned about the sporadic incidents of violence that had taken place in the outskirts of Jewish settlements in London. In his own car, he dropped me at the University gate and instructed me to ring him up before going back from the University. He

issued a strong warning to me that in view of the critical situation, I should not try to go home alone. Since childhood, he had always been behaving with me in the same manner. Whenever I had a dispute with someone at school or college, he would cling to me like my own shadow and never allow me to go anywhere alone till the danger was over. On several occasions, he had received injuries on his body for my sake. I wonder why such unique friends are not granted the status similar to that of our real parents. On account of the ceremony held during the previous day, the students at the University had been given a holiday and therefore, the University was almost empty. Only a few hostelites were present there and as soon as I entered through the gate, they welcomed me with loud cheers and slogans. I had been summoned by the university officials in connection with the inquiry that was going on against me and while I was on my way to Dean Isaac's room, the students present there expressed their strong support for me by patting me on my shoulders, shaking hands with me and hugging me warmly.

The Dean's room presented the scene of a full bench court. In addition to the members of the jury, Peter and his two false witnesses, there were a couple of new faces in the room whom I had never seen before. Sir Isaac was also sitting there and his swollen eyes and down cast face indicated that he must have had a bitter and stormy row with Sarah after Rebecca and I along with the rest of our group dropped her at her home at about two last night. I hadn't yet met Sarah since then but I could very well imagine the incidents that might have occurred at her home due to her defiant speech.

The jury started its proceedings and read out the list of charges against me. An additional charge included in the list was that I had become a source of spoiling the University's reputation. Members of the jury seemed to be in some hurry. The fact that I had been summoned to face the inquiry on a holiday had already made me suspicious about their nefarious designs. One of the new-comers was a stout and bulky fellow named Parker, who was section in charge of London's secret police. He was accompanied by two agents of UK's internal security and intelligence service known as M I 5. Peter repeated his allegations against me and the two witnesses also recorded their statements in his favour. I again repeated my old statement that I had not done any such thing. But the jury rejected my statement and announced its decision to expel me from the university with immediate effect. Peter was authorized to file a defamation suit against me or to contact London Police in case he felt some danger from me. Perhaps for this very reason, policemen were also present that day during the jury's proceedings. Parker was closely watching me throughout this process. I asked Isaac if I had the right to appeal against the decision. He told me that the University's inquiry committee had announced its final decision however; I had the right to file an appeal against the decision in any court of London. But at the same time, he threatened me indirectly that if I challenged the decision in the court, he would not prevent Peter from reporting the matter to the London Police.

The jury had announced its verdict but sir Isaac's face still remained downcast, perhaps, he could imagine the possible consequences of the verdict for him, his family and the University. He had already seen the reaction of the students when I had been temporarily barred from taking classes. Even after the announcement of the jury's decision, he went on talking to the jury members in a low whispering voice.

At last, I came out of the room and was lost in my own thoughts when the bulky intelligence officer Parker called me from behind. When I turned and looked around, I found him standing quite close to me. He seemed to be in the habit of chewing gum all the time. After having a closer look at me he said, "So you're Hammad, the man who has ignited a fire in the whole city of London. Well, it means that you are quite capable of igniting fires. While members of the jury were busy in their deliberations, I was very closely watching you. There was not the least touch of worry or anxiety on your face.

"I knew that the jury would announce the same decision because the decision had been taken a long time ago, although it has been announced today."

"Well, I really appreciate your confidence. But if you're hoping that by bringing the rest of the students of the University on the streets of London, you would be able to force the jury to reverse its

decision, let me inform you that in anticipation of the hostile reaction of the students, the University administration has decided that the University would remain closed for the next fifteen days.”

After breaking this news to me, Parker again examined my facial expressions like a veteran police officer

I looked towards him with a smile and spoke in the same confident tone. “You need not worry at all. In the eighty years history of this University, the students are getting a fortnight’s holiday quite unexpectedly without any prior notice, and I’m sure that they’ll enjoy it to the fullest extent.”

As I turned to go, Parker again called me. “What do you intend to do now?”

“I haven’t yet decided anything, but I’ll face the false allegations brought against me.”

As I again started walking, Parker again spoke, “I know that the allegations against you are false.”

I stopped and looked towards him in astonishment. He was still busy in chewing gum. “If you know that the charges against me are false, why did you remain silent throughout the inquiry?”

“Because, you had nothing to prove your innocence while they had with them some witnesses to give evidence against you. You don’t know that your friend Sarah and you have created a massive stir in the whole administration and intelligence department of London. In view of the possible reaction from the students, all the police have been placed on high alert. Even if the University administration had not called us, the city’s administration had already decided to take the matter into its own hands.”

“But how do you know that their charges against me are false?”

“My dear, I’ve been associated with the police department for the last thirty years. The moment I cast my first glance on the face of that devilish librarian, I realized that he was telling a lie and I’m sure that he’s playing this whole dirty game on the behest of the Dean of this university.”

He was really an experienced policeman who had penetrated into the depth of the matter within a very short time. “But before taking the next step, you must keep it in your mind that these people have made all arrangements of deporting you from London. I advise you to be very careful in taking any action against them.”

“How would the London police react if Peter takes the matter to the police?”

Parker was surprised at my question. “You seem to be much more intelligent than I expected. In ordinary circumstances, the police would have summoned you to the nearest police station for some time and got some oral or written guarantee from you. Then, they would have advised both of you to remain careful in future and allowed you to go. The reason is that there is a huge difference between the police laws and the laws of a university. The police requires firm evidence to declare someone guilty. It can’t describe someone as a criminal in the light of the evidence given by the two faithful employees of the accuser. But now the situation is totally different. After that day’s ceremony and your friend’s speech, the Jewish lobby has become very active. Almost seventy per cent of the charges brought against you by that Jewish librarian and his supporters have already been believed to be true. Moreover, the London administration and police are on high alert after the sporadic incidents of violence in different parts of the city. In these totally changed circumstances, the police may or may not take any action against you, but it will surely support the University administration in its stand against you. At this time, the University as well as the police regards you as a common threat.”

I thanked Parker for giving me the detailed analysis of the whole situation and promised to keep him informed about all my future steps. He patted me on my shoulder and went away. At that time, none of my friends including Sarah, Jim and Rebecca, was aware of my appearance before sir Isaac and the jury’s verdict against me. I had not informed any of them about the sudden call that I had received from the inquiry committee, because I already knew that the jury would announce the same decision. Thus, somehow or the other, sir Isaac had achieved his objective. My mind was rapidly thinking about the circumstances that I might have to face in future. I telephoned Kamran and told him about the jury’s decision. He promised to talk to some eminent lawyers about the whole affair. It was obvious that sir Isaac and his elite Jewish friends had started an all-out war against me. I was being punished for my views and for my attempt to show the path of truth and research to their

young generation. Apparently, among all of my Jewish enemies, I could only identify the face of sir Isaac, who was using another Jew Peter as a puppet, for achieving his obnoxious designs. But in reality, all the narrow-minded and aristocratic Jews of London were fully collaborating with him in his conspiracy against me. They were infuriated and outraged when a courageous Muslim boy attempted to stand up against the most powerful capitalistic Jews, who were now fully determined to inflict the severest penalty on me to make me an example for others, so that no one in future could ever think of doing such things again. But I was delighted at the fact that Sarah had conveyed my message to every nook and corner of London, from where it would reach everywhere. While thinking about her unprecedented courage, I was filled with tender feelings for her. Could there be any other such girl in the world, who was ready to put everything at stake for championing the cause of truth?

CHAPTER 34

SOME MEMORABLE MOMENTS

By the evening of that day, Sarah had come to know from her father that I had been expelled from the University. She soon broke this news to Jim, Rebecca, David, Tina and all the other members of our group. All of them wanted to assemble at Kamran's flat but I knew that his small flat would not be able to accommodate all of them. I, therefore, suggested to Rebecca that along with all her friends, she should go to Kamran's restaurant. But Sarah did not accept this suggestion. She said that she would pick me up from my home and take me to Kamran's restaurant. I could imagine her mental condition and knew that arguing with her in that situation would be of no use. While I was still pulling down from the neck, the navy blue sweater over my white jeans, when I heard the horn of Sarah's car. When I hurriedly went downstairs, I saw Sarah in her Beetle Car. She was wearing dark sun glasses although it was late in the evening. She looked much worried and her eyes indicated that she must have wept. Without saying anything, I got into her car. The female Spanish guitarist Jenny was still present in one corner of the street. Perhaps, she had seen me getting into Sarah's car and as soon as the car reached near her, she came forward with two buds of rose in her hand. With a smile she presented them to us and said, "For Signor Aamad." I tried to give her a few coins which I had at that time in my pocket but she refused to take them and said in her somewhat inarticulate English "No no. It's a gift from me for you and for Madame."

As we drove along the road, Sarah began to speak. "There is no shortage of your admirers. Wherever you go, you cast your spell and you seem to be quite popular even in your street. Isn't it?"

I smiled at her words. "The fact is that people are giving me this special importance only because you are with me. Madame Sarah, it's the outcome of your spell."

As Sarah laughed at my reply, she began to look somewhat fresh and relieved and the evening once again became bright and cheerful. In these evening rush hours, it was not so easy for her to drive her car on the crowded main roads of the city. She, therefore, took a less crowded road that passed through the outskirts of the city. It was a much longer route but on account of the huge rush on the roads, it was easier for us to reach Kamran's restaurant in a much shorter time. The restaurant was situated in one corner of the footpath on the third road from the square. The footpath seemed much wider than the road itself. While crossing the bridge on River Thames, we could see the last rays of the sun kissing the pointed tops of the turrets of the bridge and bidding farewell to them in the distance. After crossing the bridge, our car was now travelling on the long black winding road running along the bridge. After some time, Sarah parked her car along the river bank, came out of the car, went down the road and stood near the long iron railing that went far away along the road on the river bank in a zigzag manner. By now, the sun had set but the evening twilight could still be seen in the sky with its orange colour. Whenever this orange colour fell on the strips of snow lying along the river bank, I recalled a vendor who used to come to our street in my childhood with his ice balls and glass bottles full of syrup having blue, yellow and other colours. After making white ice balls, he used to pour this syrup on them and give them to us. Then, for a long time, we used to enjoy sucking those ice balls. Sarah stood silently for a while, watching the water flowing in the river. She was still wearing her thick dark glasses but I knew that behind the glasses, her eyes were wet with tears. At last, she herself broke the silence. "Papa didn't do well. I didn't consider him to be so weak. He has turned out to be a very weak-nerved person and has shattered the trust and confidence that I had in him. Hammad, I'm completely devastated from inside."

At last, she could no longer control her feelings and burst into tears. For more than twenty years, she had been adoring the statue of her father kept at the highest place. But that grand and elevated statue had now been crushed into bits. I removed the sunglasses from her eyes, wiped away her flowing tears with my fingers and palms and firmly caught both her hands into my own hands.

"Miss Isaac, you're the strongest and bravest girl in the world. This flood of tears can't weaken you in any way. The path that you've chosen for yourself is full of difficulties and challenges and in the times to come, you'll have to pass through several such experiences. In those critical moments of

your life, I and the rest of your friends may not be with you. I, therefore, advise you to prepare yourself mentally, physically and emotionally for those hard times and tough battles which lie ahead for you. Sarah, I can't see you weakening and crumbling in the face of difficulties and hardships."

She was still sobbing. "No Hammad, I'm not as strong as that. Don't give me such a lofty stature in your eyes. Don't place such a heavy responsibility on my shoulders. I'm but a weak and fragile girl and won't be able to cope with all these things."

"But you'll have to do it and I'm sure you'll do it."

I held her by her shoulders and shook her. "Sir Isaac did exactly what one enemy does to another enemy in a war. I've no complaints or grudges against him. Anyone in his place would have behaved exactly in the same manner. Believe you me, I've got no personal complaints against him."

"But why is it so? What type of war is it? What personal rivalry or animosity does my father have against you? What is it in your personality which has frightened the whole city of London? I had always considered my race to be the greatest and most superior of all. But with a single blow, you've shattered all our notions of greatness and superiority. I had always regarded my father as the strongest man on earth, but he has turned out to be the weakest man in the world. You only invited us to explore the truth. But why does my apparently strong father want to avoid this truth? I believe that it's not just the question of holocaust. It's much more than that. What should I do now Hammad? Whom should I trust? I fear all such questions will drive me mad. One after the other, all the ideals of my life are being shattered. I'm losing all my confidence and trust. I'm dying inwardly. What should I do? Where should I go?"

While expressing her feelings, Sarah went on weeping bitterly."

"You should only trust your heart. Whatever your heart says is the real truth. Some decisions should be left to be made by the heart. Let's go now. They must be waiting for us at the restaurant. You can imagine the miserable condition of Rebecca at this moment."

She smiled and I knew that such words of mine might lighten the burden of her heart to a certain extent and this is exactly what I wanted at that time. I placed her dark glasses in her hair and we went up the road towards the car. I was walking one or two steps ahead of her when suddenly she called me from behind. "Hey Medi."

I turned and looked towards her. "Are you sure that my heart would arrive at the right decision? "Don't you feel that my heart may deceive me?"

I smiled at her words. "No. Your heart would never deceive you. How can the heart of such a wonderful girl be deceitful?"

She also smiled with me and we both got into the car. She took some short cut route which enabled us to reach Kamran's restaurant within half an hour. Almost all the students of my class were already present there. Some students of other semesters were also arriving there. Kamran was terribly busy attending his guests. As soon as he saw me he shouted, "Mr. Hammad Amjad Raza, the total bill so far is 537 pounds. Please come to the counter. Rebecca at once announced that she would pay the bill without knowing that Kamran would not take even a single penny from her. All of us sat down on the chairs placed on the pavement outside the restaurant. It was dark at night and the 15th street on which Kamran's restaurant was situated was now shining brilliantly. The sharp smell of coffee was spreading everywhere. Some experienced old men were sitting on the chairs in the restaurant in order to discuss some of the most complex and most intricate issues of the time. The whole atmosphere was becoming smoky due to their cigars. If our days had been without their evenings, our life would have been quite dull and meaningless, because evenings provide us the opportunity to have some fun and entertainment with our friends, at some public places surrounded by appetizing fragrance of delicious foods and drinks. A pleasant evening spent in the company of sincere friends is indeed one of the greatest blessings of life. Far from expressing our gratitude to God for such blessings, we don't even realize their worth and value. Some poets have written huge poems only to describe the joy they felt during a single evening. Sitting in the restaurant that evening, I began to understand why such poets have done so.

All of my class fellows were furious. Jim was giving them the schedule of starting protest demonstrations on the central roads of London from the next morning. Standing on a table, Rebecca was making a fiery speech in which she was angrily telling her listeners that after expelling me from the University, the University officials had closed the University for two weeks only to hide their lies. Along with the students, the old men who were smoking their cigars were also listening to her speech with a great deal of interest. Time and again, they were clapping with the students. All the students decided to boycott the University for an indefinite period. Sarah was trying to make them understand that instead of taking the law into their own hands, they should carefully think over their future strategy so that the University administration might not be able to find any excuse for taking any action against them. But all of them were so much emotional and excited that it was quite difficult for them to understand Sarah's cautious and rational approach.

While this noisy debate of the students was still going on, I saw three long white police cars with blue lights entering the 15th street. As they stopped at some distance from the restaurant, I noticed that their hooters had been silenced. From one of them came out Parker, pulling up the galluses of his trousers. He waved his hand excitedly as he saw me. All the other students angrily glared at the uniformed policemen and began chanting slogans against London Police. With the motion of my hand, I stopped them from doing so. In the meantime, chewing the gum, Parker came near me and shook hands with me and Sarah. As we three sat down around a table in one corner of the restaurant, the other students again became busy in their earlier activity. After having a closer look at the excitement and high spirits of the students, Parker looked towards me and spoke: "It's our second meeting in a single day and I've no hesitation in saying that on each occasion, you've made me realize the strength of your character and personality. Only with the raising of your hand, this whole mob became silent. It is quite obvious from this incident that if needed, they would readily make the greatest sacrifice for you."

While Parker was speaking, the waiter placed on the table cups of coffee along with some salty biscuits and pastries. Parker picked up one of the pastries and put it into his mouth and Sarah was surprised at our intimacy and frankness. I introduced them to each other. "I know Miss Isaac," said Parker and added, "Perhaps, there's hardly anyone in London Police and administration who doesn't know about her, after her defiant speech."

"You need not worry Mr. Parker. Sarah and I have come here to prevent them from taking any wrong step. But what brings you here?"

Parker smiled. "Gentleman, now I'll have to be wherever you are. I've been instructed to keep a close watch on you and seeing the number of your ardent admirers, I believe that the higher officials were right in their decision to assign this duty to me."

For a long time, Sarah had been holding her cup of coffee without taking even a single sip. Her eyes lost in some deep thought could be seen from behind the steam of the coffee. Parker looked attentively towards her. "You seem to be somewhat worried about your friend, Miss Isaac."

"Hammad is innocent and hasn't done anything wrong. Then why is he being punished for the crimes he has never committed?"

Parker put another pastry into his mouth and spoke: "Promoting the cause of the revolution has always been the main crime of all the revolutionaries. In the past, such criminals were hanged. Trying to change the thinking of the people has always been regarded as the worst crime by the rulers and Hammad has also committed the same crime."

"If Hammad has committed the crime of triggering a revolution only by writing a term paper, I should be regarded as his accomplice, because I've committed the same crime by supporting him. But why am I not being punished for this crime?"

"They are also punishing you by trying to take your friend away from you. The signs of worry and anxiety on your face are another indication of your punishment."

He might have uttered these words intentionally or unintentionally, but whatever he had said was true. Sarah could no longer sit at that place, as she did not want to reveal her inner condition to

Parker. She apologized to him and went away. After she had gone, Parker again became attentive towards me.

“The fact that you’ve got such a sincere, devoted and committed friend shows that you’re very lucky indeed, Mr. Hammad. In this age of dishonesty and hypocrisy, one can hardly ever see such pure and unadulterated feelings among friends and even close relatives. I’ve come here to inform you that Peter has formally filed a written application against you. But I’ve assured my Chief that after my first meeting with you, I no longer have any apprehensions about you and, therefore, there’s no need for summoning you to the police station for interrogation. But the disturbing thing is that the unrest in the outskirts of the city and in the nearby Jewish settlements is increasing. The Jews consider your presence in the city to be a major threat for their young generation, especially because the daughter of one of the most influential representatives of their own community is standing shoulder to shoulder with you with all her loyalty and determination. It’s a major challenge and a cause of great embarrassment for them. For the moment, London administration is trying to deal with the matter, but I fear that by means of violence and sabotage, the Jews may try to deteriorate the situation. As long as Sarah is with you, they may avoid taking any direct action against you, but I’m much worried about the possible consequences of this whole affair for the poor workers and labourers of your community and generation who haven’t got such friends as you have. The outraged Jews may easily vent out their whole fury on these helpless and poor people.”

Parker’s words were really very disturbing for me, because I did not want any other Muslim to suffer because of me. Parker was saying the right thing. When the news of Sarah’s speech spread in the city through the newspapers that evening, some sporadic incidents of violence took place as a reaction to her speech. In some of these incidents, poor Muslims had been deliberately attacked and harassed by the extremist Jews. If the matter was not handled properly and immediately, the number of such racially motivated attacks could increase significantly. Seen in this context, the concerns of London police and administration seemed quite genuine.

“In your opinion, what should I do to prevent their outburst of anger?”

“Seen from the legal point of you, you’re in a very strong position, because you haven’t done anything which may enable the authorities to take some action against you. In fact, the London Police knows it very well that if you are arrested, you may become even more dangerous because it may further provoke and intimidate your supporters. Any good lawyer can easily get your bail before your arrest and for this very reason, we’re not thinking on such lines. I’ve come here to you with a voluntary appeal from the London Administration.”

“Voluntary appeal!” I repeated the words in utter astonishment.

“Yes. On behalf of London administration, I appeal to you to leave London voluntarily for some time, before this incident may become the cause of flaring up widespread communal riots in the city.”

His words fell on my ears like a bomb shell. “You want me to leave London but why? What wrong have I done? What would be the benefit of my leaving this city?”

“A major benefit would be that the Jews won’t find any excuse for provoking further violence in the city. They regard your presence in the city as a major threat for themselves. After your departure, their fear and anger will cool down. Moreover, for the moment, the University seems in no mood of granting you readmission. If you want to fight a legal battle against the University, you can easily do so while remaining away from London. However, if you remain here, other students who are ready to do anything and everything for you, will come out on the roads and streets of the city and in this way, others will suffer. I know that you don’t intend to use student power for negative and destructive purposes. If there had been someone else in your place, he would have caused a havoc in the whole University by now. But believe you me, your presence in London can pose a serious threat to the life and property of a large number of innocent people living here. Do consider this appeal. I’ll be waiting for your reply.”

As Parker went away, leaving me in deep and confused thoughts, Sarah who had been watching us for a long time, at once came to me and asked me about my long conversation with Parker. I told her whatever he had said to me but she angrily shook her head.

“No, you won’t go anywhere. All of us will collectively face whatever happens.”

I knew well that in this emotionally charged atmosphere, it would be extremely difficult for me to make her understand the gravity of the situation. On the other hand, standing on a table, Rebecca was again and again urging me to come and express my views. At last, I went in the midst of the students and with a great deal of difficulty made them realize that for the time being, they should put off their plan of public demonstrations on the streets of London because I wanted to take the legal course of action through the courts of the city. Addressing all of them I said, “My dear friends, the love and friendship that I have got from all of you is much dearer to me than the University’s degree. These words of mine made them sad and brought tears in Rebecca’s eyes. I caught Jim’s hand and took him to another corner of the restaurant where with extreme difficulty; I got a promise from him that he would keep the rest of the students under control. He cooled down to a certain extent when I told him that in reaction to our demonstrations and extensive media coverage, our opponents may resort to violence against innocent persons. Jim was an emotional and reckless young man who always reminded me of my younger brother Ibad who was also ever ready to put everything at stake for the sake of his friends. For a long time, he held me in his arms and then, one after another, all the students shook hands with me and left the restaurant. While going, Rebecca whispered something into Sarah’s ears and she laughed. Before leaving, Rebecca suddenly came to me, held my face in her hands, kissed me on my forehead and went away with tearful eyes. If a person is fortunate enough to have someone who loves him most intensely and most passionately and is ready to sacrifice his whole life for him, he should really consider himself to be the luckiest man on earth. These astonishing events made me understand the meaning of Divine Love. If the love of one person for another can generate such wonderful feelings of joy it is not difficult to imagine God’s feelings of delight on receiving earnest love, sincere worship and sacrifice from His creatures.

While returning home in Sarah’s car, I asked her what Rebecca had said to her in her ears. With a smile on her lips she replied, “She was urging me to drop you at your home and not to go somewhere else with you.”

I also laughed. “What did you say to her then?”

“I said I’m not so foolish as to lose such a wonderful opportunity.”

As both of us laughed, Sarah turned her car on the wide road to the right of Hyde Park. The lights of the swings of the Piccadilly Circus could be seen in the distance. I cast an inquisitive glance on her and she smiled.

“It’s the duty of every good host to ask her fellow traveler about the dinner before dropping him at his home at ten o’ clock at night. One of my favourite restaurants is situated here. Would you like to have dinner with me at that restaurant?”

Sure, but on the condition that I would pay the bill.”

In fact while coming from Kamran’s restaurant, I had brought his wallet with me and I knew that if I returned it to him without spending any money from it, he would mind it.

Sarah laughed and her car took a long turn and stopped outside the restaurant having pale lights. Sarah’s favourite restaurant could not be an ordinary one; and I realized it the moment I entered the hall. It was a very spacious hall, where elegantly placed tables were gleaming in dim lights. On one side of it, there was a large wooden dance floor and a bar. Perhaps, this restaurant was only for the members of the elite and aristocratic classes. The workers at the restaurant already knew Sarah and, therefore, as soon as she entered the hall with me, they gave her a very warm welcome. They were all addressing her as Miss Isaac. She chose a beautiful table for sitting in one corner of the hall. During my childhood, one of my favourite English songs was that in which a lover tells his beloved that he had given her his heart on the eve of last Christmas. The tune of the same song was being played in the hall. Indifferent to the whole world, some young romantic lovers, were dancing and

rocking in each other's arms on the wooden floor. At times, if Western music is played in a low pitched sound, it seems more pleasing to the ears than the Eastern Music. I have never been fond of loud, noisy and thrilling music. Instead, soft, soothing and melodious music has always appealed to me. Two lamps placed at the table had been lighted and in their light, Sarah's face was looking even more charming and fascinating. Time and again, her hair was scattered and she seemed tired of repeatedly trying to rearrange her scattered hair. While keenly observing her, I noticed that some moisture was appearing in her eyes again and again, but in a very skillful manner she was preventing this moisture from assuming the form of large tears. For a long time, we sat silently in the same manner. At last, I had to break the ice. A good hostess should not only give a good dinner to her guest, but she should also talk to him in a pleasant manner, in order to entertain him."

"You should say something. I can't talk like you. I only love to hear you talking. Whatever you say, always seems new and beautiful."

"It's the result of your refined sense of hearing that even ordinary words of mine seem poetic to you."

"Why don't you ever take the credit of any of your words or actions? Honest acknowledgement of one's virtues always saves one from many problems and gives one a sense of immense relief. What do you think about it, Mr. Medi?"

There was something new in the way she was talking to me that night. "I'm not trying to avoid taking any credit or acknowledging my good qualities. But the fact is that if at all you find something good, attractive or appealing in my personality, or in my talks, it's only because of Iman and the feelings of love she generated in my heart. Love always makes a man lovable, removes all the evils of his personality, gives sweetness to his words and fills his eyes with honey. He is transformed from a man into a fairy's child."

Sarah was listening to my words as if trying to absorb them with her eyes. Then, with a quivering voice she said, "Perhaps, I'm also no longer a human being; and I'm also becoming a fairy's child."

I looked towards her in utter astonishment. Her eyes were full of tears that looked like dew drops ready to fall like rain on the whole atmosphere.

"Yes Hammad, that's true. I fought hard against myself and tried my best to control myself, but I couldn't resist. I've fallen in love with you Hammad and have unwillingly tasted the sweet poison of love. I've drunk the whole cup of it. What should I do? I'm utterly helpless and incapacitated."

It appeared as if I had lost all my words. I tried to say something but could not utter even a single word. Two pearl-like tears dropped down from her eyes and fell on the rose petals on the table. She again mustered up her courage and spoke with her downcast eyes: "I know very well that there is only one girl who, despite her worldly death, still rules over your heart and soul and her love circulates in your veins like blood. I know about the truth and intensity of your love for Iman and yet, my heart isn't in my control. Why is it so Hammad, why? I'm so much powerless against my heart that my own life, my own days and nights and my own soul are no longer within my control? My own words and my own personality seem quite alien to me. This love has snatched away everything from me. Please tell it to return to me my existence and my breaths."

I could very well understand her condition at that time. She was speaking quite spontaneously. Sarah was a reticent girl and it wasn't she speaking to me, it was the tender and delicate girl inside her who was talking at that time. With all its ferocity and intensity, love was once again wounding the soul of another of its victims. I wondered how long the desert of love would take to quench its thirst and how many more innocent souls would be lost in its burning sand. Since times immemorial, love has been playing the same vicious game with human hearts but its lustful thirst still seems unquenchable. Even now, people living everywhere are continuously falling in love and suffering and crying most horribly, while standing at a distance, love is watching their pain and agony as an entertainment.

I could not say anything to her. In fact, I had nothing to say to her. I only firmly caught her hands and sat silently, while on the other side of the table, she also sat with her lowered head and tearful

eyes. The musicians sitting in the hall began playing the tune of a popular song sung by Lionel Richie..

“Hello!

Is it me you are looking for?

I can see it in your eyes,

I can see it in your smile,

You are all I have ever wanted

And my hands are open wide”

As young lovers were dancing ecstatically to the tune of this romantic song, it seemed as if love reigned supreme in the hall filled with dim light. The whole atmosphere was charged with lights, colours and sweet perfumes. Looking into my eyes, Sarah was silently trying to extract the maximum joy from that blissful moment. It was the most precious moment of her life and in the case of true love, even a single such moment is sufficient to pass the rest of the life.

“What can I do for you, to alleviate your pain and agony?” I asked her in a low voice and added, “You can duly assert your right on the whole of my life. I’ll do whatever you want.”

Sarah gently smiled. “If only it had been in our power to love or not to love someone. If I had the power to reverse the flow of time, I would have attempted to meet you before your first love. I wish instead of Iman, I could become the object of your first love. I wish my love could be free from this wistfulness but the tragedy of every true love is that it always begins in the same wistful manner. By authorizing me to assert my right on the whole of your life, you’ve done the greatest favour to me and given me the greatest gift of this life. I only want you to make a firm promise with me. I know that you would always be haunted by the memories of Iman but whenever you wish to look beyond your eternal love for Iman, I should be your first choice in that case. This is the only promise that I want you to make with me. I only want to get back the assurance of my existence and identity.”

Holding her delicate fingers in my palms I spoke, “I Promise.”

She touched her eyes with my hands and remained in the same position for a long time, as if trying to fully absorb into her body and soul the effects of some heavenly medicine given to her by some saintly figure to cure all her maladies and ailments. In the meantime, the tune of another song echoed in the hall. It was George Michael’s song in which he says that,

“careless whispers are my good friends.....

In this dream- like atmosphere, Sarah expressed her last desire. “Would you like to dance with me, just once?”

Her innocent expressions brought smile on my lips and both of us went towards the round wooden floor. Sarah placed her hand on my shoulder while her other hand was in my hand. Standing at a proper distance from each other, we started taking dancing steps on the floor in a rhythmic manner. A Negro who was the leader of the orchestra in the hall removed his hat and saluted me. Then he signaled to me that the next song to be played by him and the members of his group would be dedicated to me and Sarah. The next song whose tune echoed in the hall was originally sung by a popular band “Back Street Boys.”

“its only words....

And words

that all I have.”

After some time, the revolving round glow of light in the hall became still on us and standing on the edges of the round wooden floor, all the dancing couples began looking towards us. Like her whole personality, Sarah’s dance was also graceful and dignified. Instead of taking steps in a hasty or haphazard manner, she was placing her feet on the floor in a well-thought-out manner and at the most carefully chosen places. At last, when the tune of the song came to an end, I noticed that we had become the focus of attention for all the people who were giving us a standing ovation. In amazement, Sarah looked towards me and then laughed quite spontaneously. The way she laughed reminded me of a scene in the heavy rain. At times, during the heavy rain, the clouds suddenly

disperse for a while and the sun comes out brilliantly from amidst them. While watching us, all the people were smiling and all the gloom on Sarah's face had also vanished. The alchemy of love is indeed a strange phenomenon, which takes sudden twists and turns and appears in diverse forms and manifestations.

While driving back home, we were silent. During that night, she needed the same type of confidence from me which I needed from her while returning with her from the Jewish synagogue a few nights ago. At the moment of its expression, love is audacious and reckless, but as soon as that moment is gone, it becomes shy and bashful. Same was the case with Sarah that night. Travelling on the desolate roads of London, our car was heading for Kamran's flat. The scarf in Sarah's neck was fluttering again and again and she seemed lost in some deep thought. I did not deliberately interrupt her in her contemplation. Sometimes, we are in need of solitude even while living with somebody. As Sarah parked her car under Kamran's apartment and I got down from the car, she spoke to me without looking towards me. "It has been the most beautiful night of my life Hammad, and I'll never be able to forget it as long as I live." While we were coming out of the restaurant, each of us was presented with a bud of rose by the gatekeeper. It was wrapped in a small handkerchief bearing the restaurant's monogram. While getting down from the car, I forgot to pick up my bud of rose which still lay on the dash board. With a pen, Sarah noted the day, the date and the time on the handkerchief and put it into her bag. "It will always remind me of your company."

"On reaching home, do ring me up. It's very late at night and the city is full of your admirers."

Sarah nodded her head and I stepped back so that she could move forward her car. She removed the scarf from her neck, got down from the car and tied it around my neck. "It will always remain with you and serve as a reminder of the time you spent with me."

Then, she got back into her car and drove away, while standing there, I watched her as she went into another direction from the turn of the street.

The cold biting wind had a chilling impact on my whole body. The scarf that Sarah had given to me was not just a scarf. It was accompanied by her fragrance which was gradually overwhelming the whole atmosphere. Somewhere in the distance, in the silence of the night, a clock tower announced that it was two o' clock at night; and with heavy steps, I went upstairs towards Kamran's flat.

CHAPTER 35

BIDDING FAREWELL

The next few days were highly eventful. Despite Jim's earnest efforts to keep the students under control, some students protested vigorously against the sudden closure of the University. One group of students held a noisy demonstration against sir Isaac and the jury. The pro-Jewish newspapers stepped up their propaganda campaign against me and gave a highly exaggerated account of all these incidents. They described my term paper as an attack on the sacred Jewish history. This vicious propaganda campaign led to a gradual increase in the number of violent incidents. In the meantime, Parker remained constantly in touch with me and continued his efforts to know about my response to his voluntary offer. On that evening, I was sitting with Kamran in his flat when I received a telephonic call from Parker.

"All right Mr. Parker, I'm ready to leave London. But are you sure that my departure would lead to the deescalation of violence and tension in the city?"

"I'm absolutely sure about that. You're the main target of Jews but unable to take any direct action against you, they are venting out their fury on the poor labour class and the hostile propaganda of the press is damaging the image and reputation of these poor workers. After your exit from the scene, they would be left with no more reason to continue their movement."

"All right Mr. Parker, I'll leave the city after three days. You may convey this news to everyone through the media, so that my opponents as well as supporters may become aware of my plans and give up their violent activities. I can't see any other innocent person suffering because of me."

For a while, silence prevailed in the telephone line. Then, Parker took a deep breath and spoke again. "I knew that you'd arrive at the same decision. With this confidence about you in my mind, I have so far been able to prevent London Police from taking any false action against you, although in this process, I had to face the criticism of many such people with whom I don't even like to talk in ordinary circumstances. Apparently, your opponents have been successful in expelling you from London but you've given a shattering blow to their age-old beliefs and concepts which they have been preaching to their young generation for decades. I'm sure that the members of their young generation would never forget the revolutionary ideas which you've given to them. You're indeed a brilliant and courageous young man. I wish you all the best."

Having said this, Parker hung up and Kamran cast a worried glance on me. "So have you really made up your mind to leave the city? The war isn't over yet. I've talked to the most prominent lawyers of London and we'll continue to fight till the very end."

"I'm not telling you to end the legal fight. You can continue to fight this legal battle even in my absence, but for the moment, it's better for me to disappear from the scene, because a large number of innocent persons are finding themselves in a difficult situation due to my presence in the city. Their only crime is that they are the followers of my religion."

Kamran was justified in his anger but I stuck to my decision. Within a few hours, all of my friends came to know of my decision through the media. Sarah and Rebecca were the first to come to the flat where I was living. Rebecca was emotional and furious. "How have you taken such an arbitrary decision without taking us into confidence? We won't allow you to go anywhere. We would block all the roads and routes leading to the airport on the day of your departure. We won't even hesitate to lie down on the roads leading to the airport."

"You should be very careful in selecting the road for this purpose, otherwise, the long hours that you spend daily on the make up of your face would be wasted."

Rebecca laughed even in her anger but then, she shouted again. "It's not a joke, Mr. Medi. We have some rights on you and by virtue of these rights, I again insist that you won't go anywhere."

Sarah was standing silently because she was aware of the motives behind my decision. While sitting in Kamran's restaurant a few days ago, I had told her about the discussion that I had with Parker. Moreover, she was closely monitoring the incidents of violence going on in the city. But

despite knowing all these things, it was quite evident from her facial expressions that she had been shocked to hear about my decision.

All of us were sitting around the tables placed on the footpath outside Kamran's restaurant. In a short while, Jim, David, Tina and others also arrived there and it was very hard indeed for me to cool down their passions. After explaining to them the reason for my leaving London I said, "I'm not going to leave this city forever. I'll always feel your presence like blood in my body. Wherever I live, my heart will always beat with your hearts."

Tears were again and again appearing in Rebecca's eyes. In order to change the sad tone of the atmosphere I remarked, "Instead of arranging a farewell party, some people are in the habit of bidding farewell to their friends only with the help of their tears."

With her tearful eyes, Rebecca smiled and invited all the students of the class to her home for dinner the next evening. In order to console my friends, while sitting at the same place among them, I gave some instructions about my case to my lawyers on the mobile phone. During this whole process, Sarah was sitting there without saying even a single word. Perhaps, some conflict was going on in her mind. One after the other, all of my friends left the place and Sarah also went towards her Battle Car. I had come to the restaurant that evening with Kamran and was thinking of returning with him to his flat, but Sarah's gestures indicated that she wanted me to accompany her to some place. Realizing the situation, Kamran himself solved her difficulty. Addressing her he said, "Miss Isaac, I'll be extremely grateful to you if you drop my sentimental friend at my home on your way. In this way, I'll be able to do some more business at the restaurant. He's going to inherit a huge amount of money from his father, while my father only left good wishes and prayers for me."

"Sarah smiled to hear his words and remarked, "It will be my pleasure."

Kamran came close to me and whispered into my ears, "So my dear boy, enjoy your journey and be thankful to your generous friend who has given this wonderful chance to you. Standing near the car, she was actually waiting for me, but out of my infinite generosity, I have sacrificed my chance for your joy."

In reply, I also whispered, "A cat always dreams of getting meat."

As Kamran showed signs of displeasure, I got into Sarah's car. Standing at some distance, she had seen us whispering to each other.

"What was your friend saying to you?"

I told her what Kamran had said to me and she smiled. "Your friend is really worthy of friendship. I was reluctant to go home alone but couldn't ask you to accompany me in the presence of your friend, but he himself solved my problem. You've got so many good people around you while we can't find even a single one."

I understood what she actually wanted to say and smiled. "So many good people are around me but I'm with you. Why to complain then?"

Sarah smiled but the very next moment, the same signs of sadness appeared on her face. "So you're going after all, leaving us alone in this city?"

"I'm always with you, always in your control."

Sarah remained silent as if lost in some deep and complex mental conflict. Then, she spoke in a calm and calculated manner. "For several days, I've been trying to explore the reason which has made you an object of fear for so many people but all my attempts to find out that reason have so far ended up in failure. Even after studying the Torah and the Gospels again and again, I've not been able to discover the secret, which makes you so prominent among us and gives you a special status in your eyes. There's really something strange and mysterious among you which makes you so confident and determined that even my apparently strong minded father, despite his towering personality, seems to be a dwarf when compared with you. In fact, he looks like those thousands of tiny dwarfs who repeatedly conspire to bring down a tall prince but always fail miserably in their attempts. But what's that something special in you?"

“Honestly speaking, I’ve got nothing to be proud of. If my religion is the cause of worry for my opponents, I can only say that all those who follow this religion are proud of it. But the fact is that I’ve never been able to properly fulfil even a single duty which my religion imposes on me. Frankly speaking, I consider myself to be a blemish for my religion. None of my actions is in conformity with this religion and you know very well that on account of the tragedy which happened with Iman, I’ve always regarded this religion as my enemy and an obstacle in the way of my happiness. Before coming to London, I strongly believed that Maulvi Alim who was the symbol of religion for me, snatched away my Iman from me. Till then, I had never imagined that this religion would make me so much important and give me such an elevated stature in the eyes of my friends that all of my opponents would be terribly afraid of me. I had never considered my religion to be a source of pride for me. But now, the hostility of so many people has made it a source of pride for me. Before coming to London, I hadn’t even heard the word holocaust, nor did I ever feel any sympathy for the sufferings and hardships of the Palestinians. If so many difficulties had not been created in my way at the University, I might not have even thought of doing any research on the subject of holocaust. In that case, I might have regarded the holocaust only as an incident and might not have made any attempt to explore its truth or falsehood. In fact, it was sir Isaac who put me on this course. It was he who played the key role in awakening my passion of religious pride. But if there’s some truth or message other than it which has terrified him, I’m myself unable to understand it.”

“I’m also in search of the same truth. Won’t you assist me in finding it out, Hammad?”

I was attentively listening to her. What could be that message or truth which she wanted to discover? It was late in the evening and the final rays of the sun were about to return after bidding farewell to the turrets of the tall buildings. Suddenly, a brilliant idea flashed across my mind on seeing a large dome rising above a building. At that time, we were passing through Central London which was inhabited by a large community of Asians. As Sarah parked her car along the road side, we got down from it and I could see in front of me the same building that had a tall minaret. The golden sun beams falling on the Minaret had brightened my mind as well. It was the largest mosque in Central London. Sarah looked towards me in astonishment as I spoke. “I may be able to read out to you a part of that message, if you observe certain formalities and come with me inside this building. Sarah silently followed me and as we entered the mosque, I saw a large number of taps for warm and cold water. As I started performing ablution, Sarah attentively looked towards me and washed her hands, face, arms and feet exactly as I was doing. Then, she sat down silently in the mosque’s courtyard. I went inside and brought out a copy of the Holy Quran. I had touched this book after several years. I had held it for the last time when at the age of 13, I had finished its reading and the Maulvi had congratulated me on that occasion. Later, when Maulvi Alim used to come to our home for teaching Sunny, I used to hover around him for my own selfish interest. On those occasions, I could hear the words of the Quran as recited by the Maulvi. I opened the Quran and started the recitation of its Soorah (chapter) named Rahman, along with its translation. The following verse is repeated several times in this Soorah. “So which of thy Lord’s favours will you deny?”

While I was reciting this Soorah, Sarah was carefully listening. Later, when I lifted my eyes, I was stunned to see that the rust of her heart was flowing out of her eyes in the form of tears. I too could not control my tears and within a single moment, I could see several faces in front of my eyes. These were the faces of Maulvi Alim, Sufi Rehmatullah whom I met at the railway station, Abdullah and others who were fulfilling their duties as human beings and God’s Servants, while I had not thanked God even for my existence in this world. Why do we come to this world? In what type of activities do we spend the whole of our life? Daily, instead of repenting on our past sins, we increase the bulk of our sins and continue to live in a carefree and indifferent manner, without any fear of accountability. All the way back, Sarah went on shedding tears and I too remained silent. At last, when she dropped me at Kamran’s flat, she was looking quite calm after much weeping. While parting from Sarah that night, I realized for the first time how difficult sometimes it is to bid farewell

to a sincere and dear friend. Sarah returned home while I lay tossing in my bed with a strange type of restlessness.

CHAPTER 36

ANOTHER IMAN

The next evening, all of my class fellows and all the friends of Rebecca were present at her home. The only person who was absent was Sarah. Rebecca contacted all those places where Sarah could be present at that time, but she was nowhere. She tried all her phone numbers but all in vain. Then, she dialed her home number but there was nobody at her home. The call was attended by a domestic servant who knew Rebecca. He told her that after having a bitter row with sir Isaac in the morning, Sarah had gone somewhere. Sarah's Mama had also gone out in search of her and had not yet returned. When asked about sir Isaac, he told that he had gone to his office and was still at the University. Rebecca took me to a secluded corner of the party hall and gave this information. Both of us were much worried about Sarah and her safety. How could she go somewhere without telling anyone of us? We were hoping that she might arrive at the party after some time. But we were not in a position to leave the party and go in search of Sarah, because Rebecca was the host while I was the person for whom the whole show had been arranged. But we were much worried about Sarah and were not enjoying ourselves at the party. All of my class fellows were present there to encourage me and to express their full support for me. A number of students from the second semester were also there. One of the reasons for that large gathering was that Rebecca was extremely popular at the University. Even during the party, we repeatedly dialed Sarah's phone numbers but could get no information about her. Kamran was at the restaurant and was expected to join us after some time. I telephoned him and told him that before coming to Rebecca's home, he should go to Sarah's home. But when he arrived at the party, he also told us that he could get no information about Sarah. At last, the party was over and the guests began to leave one after the other. Each of them embraced me and assured me of full co-operation and support. Jim, David and Tina literally wept. It was indeed a strange relationship. Apparently, I had no relationship with them and yet, they were all so dear near and sincere to me on that day. They were fully determined to stand firmly by me, in the midst of hostile winds and tempestuous storms. I then realized that wars are won by means of high spirits and moral courage. If someone is fortunate enough to have such devoted friends, there is indeed no cause of worry for him. All of them had brought gifts for me and they all assured me that within a very short time, I would be back among them. Having witnessed their selfless love and sincerity for them, I could not stop the flow of tears from my eyes. Human heart is a unique and strange thing. It has the capacity to withstand the hostility of the whole world, but on observing the unadulterated love of friends, it spontaneously melts and expresses its tenderness in the form of tears. Rebecca had indeed arranged a spectacular party, perfect in all respects. All the guests thanked her for the party in her highly decorated palace-like home, where a number of uniformed waiters were present in the hall for the service of the guests. Rebecca had made excellent arrangements of food and music. Outside the house, she had arranged barbeque and musical orchestra near the swimming pool. The whole place was flooded with lights, colours and perfumes and was echoing with hilarious laughs, but the whole show looked dull and dreary on account of Sarah's mysterious absence. Jim, David and Tina were also repeatedly asking about her. At last, all were gone and only Kamran, Rebecca and I were left in the hall. I again thought of sending him in search of Sarah. It was almost midnight and by that time, Sarah should have arrived back home. While we were still thinking about her, Rebecca's special servant who had acted as the chief butler during the party came into the hall and informed her that Mr. Isaac had come and wanted to talk to Rebecca. It was indeed a stunning news for us. How could sir Isaac come there so late into the night? Acting upon Rebecca's instructions, her servant took sir Isaac to the drawing room and soon, we also went there. The moment I entered the drawing room, I saw sir Isaac who apologized to Rebecca for coming to her home at such a late hour. "Sarah hasn't arrived home yet, I thought she might be here with you. She has switched off her cell phone."

"We too are much worried about her and have been trying to trace her since evening. Even now we were about to go in search of her when you came here."

"In case you get some information about her, do tell me, Rebecca."

Rebecca nodded her head and sir Isaac stood up to leave. While he was on his way towards the gate, I had a brief encounter with him during which, he glared at me with furious and contemptuous eyes.

“I won’t allow you to snatch away my daughter from me. The final victory will be mine.”

“I had never intended to snatch away your daughter from you. You yourself have lost her. However, wherever she is, we’ll find her. As far as the question of final victory is concerned, I think it’s better for us to leave it to be decided by the final battle; otherwise, people might say that a student obstructed the path of his teacher.”

After casting a final look on me, sir Isaac went out. I was full of apprehensions about Sarah, as the city was full of her hidden enemies. I instructed Kamran to go to the East in search of her while I myself decided to travel to the West to all the places which Sarah had often described as her favourite places. As Kamran went away, Rebecca gave me the keys of her car. But then, she too decided to go with me in search of Sarah. After all, Sarah had been her closest friend since childhood and she knew about a number of places which were even unknown to me. First of all, Rebecca and I went to Sarah’s school and college but were met with disappointment. When my worry and anxiety about Sarah became uncontrollable, I prayed to God most passionately and most earnestly for her safety. I prayed to the same God whom I had completely forgotten after Iman’s demise, the same God with whom I was annoyed and whom I considered to be the chief cause of Iman’s death. There come only a few moments in our life when we pray to God with all our sincerity, passion and devotion. It was also one such moment of my life. I had hardly finished my prayer when my mobile phone began ringing. It was Sarah calling me.

“Sarah, where are you? You seem to have no idea of how much we are all worried about you. At this midnight hour, Rebecca and I are out on the streets of London in search of you.”

In a few angry remarks, I expressed all my feelings, while she listened without saying anything. At last, she spoke: “I know that all of you must have been greatly upset and disturbed because of my attitude, but I was helpless. At the time of life changing and momentous decisions, we are all in need of solitude. Anyhow, I’m going to give you an address. Come here at once with Rebecca. I’m waiting for you.”

After telling me her address, she hung up. We had already visited the place where she was at that moment. But the moment I heard the news that she was at that place, my heart suddenly started beating so violently that I had a feeling that it would soon leap out of my mouth. With a great deal of difficulty, I controlled my apparent condition and directed Rebecca to drive her car towards that place. Rebecca’s astonishment was also evident from her face but in view of my condition, she too remained silent. Within a short time, we were in Central London and could see Sarah’s Battle Car standing along the roadside, while she herself was standing nearby, clad in her blue fur coat, whose collars had been turned up by her in order to protect herself from cold. We could see from a distance that someone else was also standing beside her. Rebecca and I got down from the car and went towards Sarah. The sight of her Mama standing with her confounded both of us. Rebecca went briskly towards her and embraced her. At last, she spoke: “I’m sorry to have disturbed all of you in this way. I even disturbed my dear Mama at midnight hour, but I was left with no other alternative.”

It was quite evident from her Mama’s eyes that she had been weeping with her daughter for a long time, but the storm of passion seemed to have passed off before our arrival and from their faces, they looked much relieved and calm. Mrs. Isaac caressed her daughter’s cheeks and beckoned me to come near. As I advanced towards her in some confusion, she warmly hugged me, combed my hair with her fingers and said, “You’re a truthful and courageous young man. I’m proud to know that my daughter has made friendship with a truthful and brave boy. I’ll always be praying for Sarah and you.”

Unable to understand the situation, I looked towards Sarah inquiringly. It was about 4-30 or 4-45 in the morning, when all of a sudden, the whole place started echoing with the words of Azan (Call to Prayer). Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar (Allah is Great, Allah is Great). At that time, all of us were

standing near the grand mosque in Central London where we had come during the previous night and had been able to wash off some of the rust of our hearts. Having observed my astonishment, Sarah smiled and said, "Hammad, I've heard and accepted the message of truth. Now, my way forward is quite clear. I told you that I was in search of the real sense of superiority and pride. Today, I've discovered it. As a result of your company, I can now see my goal which has always been present across the river of fire, but remained hidden from my eyes. Now, I have decided to cross this river and my great mother has also permitted me to do so. She has decided to stand by me and support me. On account of her own compulsions, she can't go with me across this river. But I'm contented with the thought that she, Rebecca and you are all with me."

Rebecca was constantly looking towards Sarah as if she had been watching something in a dream. After some pause, Sarah spoke again holding my and Rebecca's hands. "Let's march on the path of truth. Why to delay in this sacred journey?"

In this dream-like atmosphere, all of us entered the mosque and were warmly welcomed by an English born Deputy Imam, who had a halo of light around his face. Perhaps, Sarah had already told him everything. While watching him, I remembered Maulvi Alimuddin. Do all the pious people have similar faces? In a respectful manner, he told us to sit under the dome. After reciting some supplications, he told Sarah to repeat the first Kalima after him. "There is no god but Allah." With a sharp sound, a group of pigeons who were picking up grains in the courtyard, flew in the air as to salute Sarah. Afterwards, Sarah repeated the words of the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth Kalimas after him. While hearing her reciting these holy words, I remembered those days when for the sake of my own selfish motives, I had memorized all the six Kalimas in the hope of getting closer to Maulvi Alimuddin. For a moment, I felt that the English born white Deputy Imam of the mosque sitting in front of me had been replaced by Maulvi Alimuddin, accompanied by Abdullah with his smiling face. As I turned and looked towards Rebecca, I saw Sufi Rehmatullah sitting there in a cheerful mood and saying, "Well-done gentleman, while we were only looking out of the mosque through the window, you called him inside the mosque through that window."

After ending her supplication, Sarah touched her face with her hands and Rebecca also put her scarf on her head and sat in a respectful manner. The Imam congratulated Sarah on starting her journey on the path of truth. Sarah's Mama was still shedding tears. Sarah caught her in her arms and kissed her passionately. With tearful eyes, Rebecca also tried her best to console her. I also caught Mrs. Isaac's hands because I could find no other means of consoling and encouraging her at that time. Mrs. Isaac was indeed a great woman and even greater was the relationship that existed between her and her daughter. They were like close intimate friends, or to be more exact, as hand in glove with each other. It is extremely difficult to find a mother in the whole world who, without caring the least for her family's reputation and her long standing relation with her husband, comes out of her home at midnight, in order to console her daughter who has decided to change her ancestral religion. Sarah and her mother were really unique and wonderful people and there must have been something special in the formative elements of their structures.

When those emotional moments passed off, the Imam asked us about Sarah's new name as a Muslim girl. Mrs. Isaac looked towards Sarah and she looked towards me. Quite spontaneously, I said, "We're going to change her name."

"Well, what new name do you suggest for her?"

"Iman," I replied.

Both Sarah and Rebecca looked towards me in astonishment.

"What?"

"Yes, I propose that her new name should be Iman."

"Do you agree?" the Imam asked Sarah.

"I regard this name as an honour for me," she replied.

The Imam placed his hand on her head and prayed for her. Rebecca also bent forward her head and Sarah smiled. The Imam then placed his hand on my head and on Rebecca's head and prayed for

both of us. The whiteness of the morning had appeared while the shadows of the dark night had vanished. With its milky white light, it was the most brilliant morning of my life. Iman was still firmly holding my hand when we came out of the mosque and walked towards our cars. It was a typical London morning, with the whole city under the cover of thick fog, due to which it was difficult for us to see Iman's car that had been parked only a few yards away from us. She looked into my eyes with a smile and said, "I may not be able to live in your heart but your God now lives in my heart."

I held her face in my hands kissed her forehead and gave her delicate hand into her mother's hand. "It's the most valuable possession of my life; please take care of her."

Mrs. Isaac smiled. "Don't worry my dear boy. Your most valuable possession is in safe hands. I'll always stand as a solid rock between her and everyone who has evil designs for her."

Rebecca also stepped forward, held Iman in her arms, kissed her forehead and said, "You are the winner today. I'm proud to be your friend."

I could very well imagine the dangers, challenges, hardships, trials and tribulations lying ahead for Sarah. But I was also well aware of the fact that she was an exceptionally courageous girl and knew how to tackle all the problems. It is interesting to note that I had used religion as a stepping stone to get closer to Maulvi Alim in the hope of getting Iman. But perhaps, there was some flaw or defect in all such attempts of mine. But this truthful girl did not use religion only as a means of attaining my love. Whatever she did was done by her most earnestly and most truthfully, without the least touch of hypocrisy or falsehood. Her love for me and God was pure and unadulterated. She was truthful in both her loves. In the thick fog of that morning, we parted from one another and got into our cars. As long as she could, Iman went on looking towards me, because she knew that I would leave London the next day, by the first flight and nobody knew for how long we would not be able to meet again. For a long time, Rebecca and I went on watching Iman's white Battle Car disappearing into the thick fog of London just as smoke dissolves into smoke. Then, Rebecca also moved forward her car.

CHAPTER 37

NEVER SAY GOOD-BYE

When Kamran and I set out for London's Heathrow Airport, it was drizzling and by the time we reached the airport, this drizzle had changed into heavy rain. Throughout the way, I went on reading that morning's newspapers which had given extensive coverage to Sarah's conversion to Islam. The Pro-Jewish newspapers, had used very harsh words for her and had described the whole incident as an emotional girl's sacrifice of her religion for the sake of her love for a Muslim boy. Some romantic newspapers had described the incident as a grand victory for love and as a great embarrassment for sir Isaac. It was reported that sir Isaac had decided to disown Iman. In an interview, he had given her three days to acknowledge her mistake and return to her earlier religion if she wanted to inherit his property. In his interview, he had accused me of misguiding and misleading his daughter. The news of my departure from London was also reported in a number of newspapers. Perhaps, Iman had refused to talk to the news reporters. Only a single sentence spoken by her had been quoted in the newspapers. "Truth is a difficult and thorny path and love facilitates us in walking on this thorny path."

As we arrived in the airport's parking lounge, I saw a huge crowd of my friends, supporters and well-wishers. First of all, dripping in rain, Rebecca dashed towards me, firmly clasped my hand and dragged me away from the crowd. We were becoming thoroughly wet with the downpour. "Stand with me for a few moments. I wish to absorb your whole existence through the eyes and print its image permanently on my heart, so that whenever in future I get a chance to look into my heart in solitude, I should see nothing except your image."

Standing a few yards away, Jim, David, Tina and other were shouting loudly, but I did not want to disturb Rebecca in her crazy love. For a few moments, I allowed her to watch me with full concentration. While observing her tearful eyes, I remembered Charlie Chaplin who had said that he liked to walk in rains because in that condition, nobody could see his flowing tears. I stepped forward and scattered her wet hair. In her attempt to smile, she choked with emotions. She only regained her senses when I asked her about Iman. She looked around worriedly.

"I don't know where she is. She must have arrived here by now."

Quite indifferent to the heavy rain, all of my friends and class fellows had gathered in large numbers in the vast corridors of the airport. They were all carrying beautiful bouquets and were enthusiastically waving their hands and chanting slogans. This emotionally charged atmosphere was quite surprising for the members of the airport staff, because they had not been informed beforehand of any VIP passenger's coming to the airport that day. They were unaware of the simple fact that love has the power to grant you the status of the world's most important personality. My eyes were looking for Iman, but she was still seen nowhere. One after another, all of my friends met me for the last time. All of a sudden, I saw Parker's car coming at some distance. It was boarding time and through the glass door, I could see the passengers going into the hall in a queue. After Parker's car, two more police cars with their blue lights entered the compound of the airport. As usual, Parker was chewing the gum as he came out of his car. Afterwards, Iman and her Mama also came out of the same car. Iman rushed towards me and firmly clasped my hand.

"A large number of hurdles have been placed in our way, but even then, you see, I've come here to say good-bye to you."

"I knew you would surely come."

Mrs. Isaac stepped forward, kissed my forehead and expressed good wishes for me. With a smiling face, Parker also came forward and remarked, "So at last, you're going my dear young rebel. But I knew that before leaving this place, you would win the final battle."

Perhaps, he was referring to Iman.

"I shall always be extremely grateful to you for enabling my friend to come here in these extremely difficult and dangerous circumstances."

“My dear friend, there’s no need for any thanksgiving. They had tried their best to block all the routes leading to the airport, but today, I was determined to do something which would always be a source of pride for me.”

Parker again embraced me very warmly. After meeting Parker, I went towards Iman who was standing silently with a bouquet in her hands. With a smile I looked towards the flowers in her hands. “Have you brought these flowers for me or do you intend to present them to Mr. Parker on your way back?”

Iman smiled. “No, these flowers are only meant for you. But instead of giving them to you today, I would present them to you on the day when you would arrive back at the same airport and all of us would once again assemble here to welcome you. That blessed moment may come after centuries, but I’ll continue to wait for it. On that occasion, you would see with your own eyes that these flowers would still be fresh and fragrant as they are today. They would never fade, never, never.”

While uttering these highly emotional words, her eyes were filled with tears and I realized that the deadly poison of parting was once again showing its effect. Perhaps, love and parting are inseparable. Love seems to have been created due to parting and for the sake of parting. If there had been no parting, there would have been no love. In the same way, man would not have come into existence, if there had been no concept of worshipping a Superior Being.

Iman was finding it extremely difficult to control her feelings. The Boarding Lady was now calling my name from inside the room. Iman lifted her eyes and spoke again: “So you’re going?”

“No, I’m not going anywhere. I’ll always be with you and very close to you.”

I gently scattered her hair with my fingers and she smiled. Then, without looking towards her, I quickly went into the Boarding Lounge. The thick dark glasses which I was wearing at that time, proved very helpful to me as it did not allow others to see the flood of my tears. I also love to walk in rains because in this condition, people cannot see my flowing tears. For the last time, I turned and looked towards those who had come to the airport. Iman, Kamran, Mrs. Isaac, Rebecca, Jim, David, Tina, Parker and a large number of others were still standing near the glass wall and waving their hands while looking towards me. All of them had gathered there in that heavy rain only because of me. In these circumstances, who can say that I was alone in London? Who can say that I was departing from London empty handed and without achieving anything? In this city, I had formed the world’s most valuable relations and while leaving that city, I was considering myself to be the richest man on earth.

For the last time, I looked towards all of them and waved my hand. I could feel the tears flowing out of Iman’s eyes falling directly on my heart. Then, I turned around and was soon lost into the crowd of passengers. Soon, the aeroplane took off and sitting beside the window, I could see the city of London dissolving into fog. The drops of rain were falling on the window screen and vanishing into the air below. I remembered that six months ago, I had come to this city on a similar rainy morning, and while leaving it that day, rain was once again my companion. Rains are indeed a strange thing. At times, torrential rains continue to fall during our whole life, but our inside being always remains dry and arid. On other occasions, only a few drops of rain are quite sufficient to make us thoroughly wet, although the people around us are quite unaware of it.

I had a last look on London disappearing into the white smoke of fog. Then, overwhelmed with emotions and exhaustion, I shut my eyes and began recalling the lines of an Urdu poem.

“How are you,” I said”

**Are you the same or somewhat changed instead?
Do you still have the same old style and look?
Or is there some change in your life’s book?
Are you feeling the pangs of separation?
Or is someone near you for your consolation?
I never liked this compulsive isolation,**

**Nor did I ever like this separation
We are still not away from each other,
Our souls are still tightly tied to each other
The tears falling from our eyes today,
Must have got something to say;
Your sweet, tender and melodious voice,
Is still with me as my favourite choice;
The flowers of love will blossom again,
You and I will meet again.**

Nadeem.

Hashim